

Time, Love and Armageddon

by Soul Hunter

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## 1. Prologue

Time, Love and Armageddon: Prologue

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Time, Love and Armageddon

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\*\*PROLOGUE\*\*

\*\*Feb 14, 1999 \*\*

Dick Grayson felt a strange compulsion as he walks past the Bludhaven Museum of World History. He ignored the weird feeling, scurrying past the city landmark in an effort to make it on time for his lunch date with a certain Nina Williams, a lady who has given him much to wonder about during the past few days. An hour later, on his way back to his apartment after being stood up by his mysterious date, the police academy student who is secretly Bludhaven's resident crimefighter operating under the guise of Nightwing, again felt the unusual drive to enter the museum. He then walks through the door

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Feb 14, 1599

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A young and lovely peasant woman quietly attends to her chores as a weaver in a small and dainty Japanese village. While nearby, a rich yet still youthful nobleman watches her intently. Enchanted by her beauty, the kind-hearted feudal lord approached the girl and politely

introduced himself to her, expressing how he was disarmed by her gentle charm.

Flashing a wry smile, the 26-year old peasant girl suddenly unsheathed a shimmering psi blade and aimed it at the man's neck.

"This is Jutte" hissed the suddenly fierce woman as she brandished her deadly weapon. "And she is nigh-indestructible. Throw your pitch at me again and I will make your neck flash a bloody smile from one ear to the other."

The nobleman, startled by the unexpected display of savagery by this seemingly gentle soul, withdrew from her presence and vowed never to bother her again.

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Mar 17, 1999

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The Justice League received an emergency summons from NASA Command Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, alerting them of an immense meteor cluster on a direct collision course with the earth. The cluster, measuring in excess of seven thousand miles across, is composed of gigantic metallic rocks each measuring at least one hundred miles wide and weighing in the vicinity of thousands of tons. Traveling at half the speed of light, the meteor cluster is only ten days away from hitting earth when it was detected.

The world's mightiest heroes scrambled to intercept the cosmic threat. But despite their gallant efforts, two huge chunks slipped past the blockade and slammed into the earth's surface with such tremendous impact, surpassing the force of one thousand nuclear bombs going off simultaneously. Tens of millions of human lives were instantly lost in the impact, while millions of tons of dust and debris were blown into the atmosphere, which soon blanketed the earth with a thick and impenetrable cloud of dust that completely blocked the sun's rays. The end of the world is now imminent.

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Dec 14, 1957

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Japanese-American technician Robert Hiroyuki, working from an observatory in Matterhorn peak in Switzerland, received a cable message from a group of scientists at the other side of the world. Hiroyuki, himself a part of the worldwide scientific exploration project known as the International Geophysical Year (IGY), read the missive, containing an instruction to point the large radio telescope at the coordinates given. He accomplished his task accurately and without delay.

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The time-stream, a river of chronal energy which bridges the gap in all time and space

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Waverider, stalwart constituent of the Linear Men, a group of self-styled guardians of the time-stream, frantically forms a force field to fend off the relentless attacks of his opponent, the insane cosmic criminal called Era. A former time-keeper herself, Era went mad after her devastating battle with a being known only as Lkz, an omni-potent energy creature believed to have originated from the 5th dimension, whose campaign not only consisted of defeating this upstart cosmic being, but also included putting the shackles on the mighty Spectre himself during the short-lived war with the 5th dimension.

Seeing that she had become a deadly force that threatens the space-time continuum, the powerful Linear man had no recourse but to imprison her in the Still Zone. Era recently broke free from her bonds and made her way back into the time-stream, staging an attack that almost caught Waverider by surprise. Now locked in battle with the powerful cosmic being, the time guardian wonders about what could she possibly get with his demise. Meanwhile, a simultaneous attack by the two protagonists brought them crashing into the 16th century.

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Feb 14, 1588

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A woman stands, profusely weeping, near the edge of a tall cliff over-looking a Japanese fishing fleet. Her melancholy was interrupted by a strange noise and a bright flash of light. When she turned around, she witnessed a scene that nearly made her freeze with fear: two bizarrely garbed beings who seemed to possess the power of gods, ferociously battling each other. Waverider only became aware that they were seen by the woman when his enemy fired a deadly chronal blast towards the helpless bystander. Unmindful of his own personal safety, the time guardian raced to snatch the woman away from the line of fire. To his utter surprise, Era suddenly disappeared after her energy blast missed its target. After making sure that the frail witness is safe and has no memory of the things that she saw, Waverider promptly departed back into the time-stream.

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Feb 16, 1588

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The woman who witnessed the battle between Waverider and Era had no recollection of the bizarre events that took place two days ago. However, the cause of her sorrow is still very much fresh in her mind and heart. Lying on her bed, the distraught damsel tearfully drank a deadly fluid that she extracted from a poisonous plant. She was discovered a half hour later by her niece, who tried to revive her,

albeit futilely. As she breathed her last, the dying woman weakly faced her beloved niece Taki, and made her vow never to fall in love with a man. The young Taki, who was told later of her aunt's sad experience of being abandoned by her husband, made the vow as her guardian expired. This event spawned the neophyte ninja's fiery hatred towards men.

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Vanishing Point, a satellite located beyond the confines of time and space which serves as headquarters for the Linear Men

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Upon reaching his base, Waverider was shocked to witness the event that laid waste the entire world during the year 1999. Having knowledge from his endless work of cataloging history that this was not supposed to happen, the time guardian realized that somehow, history has been altered as an effect of his battle with Era.

Cross-checking his vast database, the stalwart time-keeper further realized that the woman he rescued was supposed to die on that day, in a suicidal attempt to fling herself down the cliff where he pulled her off from. However, he was faced with the unnerving realization that he is not allowed to undo the actions that he himself did, lest he risks the possibility of setting off a chain reaction that could unravel the existence of space and time.

Waverider is now faced with the difficult task of rectifying time with an event that will not have other reverberations in history, other than undoing the chain of events that he started. He sets off into the 20th century to find allies to help him with his mission.

## 2. Part 1

Time, Love and Armaggedon Part 1

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Time, Love and Armageddon

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\*\*Part One\*\*

\*\*July 3, 1999 \*\*

It's his birthday, but Dick Grayson can find no reason to celebrate now that the earth is on the brink of extinction. Having transformed into his Nightwing identity and wondering why he still bothered to do so, the crimefighter watched from his modified S-117 interceptor jet (loaned to him by Wayne Enterprises in a clandestine transaction) the sad sight of the ruined eco-system of the United States eastern seaboard, as he approached the secret sanctuary of his ally, the mysterious Dark Knight Detective, the Batman. He was met by a deep, resonating voice as he dismounts from his aircraft.

"Funny you still find it worthwhile to wear your costume."

Nightwing didn't answer, and instead flung his right hand to enable the door pad just beyond the concealed landing strip to read his palm prints. Recognizing his identification, the Batcave's security system triggered a computer pulse that opened the portal leading to the main chamber. There he saw the sullen figure of multi-millionaire philanthropist Bruce Wayne, sitting quietly in front of the huge monitor screen which shows evidence that it had recently been turned off.

"I was in the neighborhood, just thought I'd drop by." Quipped the man who was once the first Boy Wonder, not so much as intending to start a conversation, but merely to break the irritating silence permeating the dark chamber.

"Of course, there's not much of a neighborhood left, is there?" Bruce answered coldly.

Nightwing lowered his head in defeat, recognizing the chilly truth in the words of the man that he always looked up to. He elected to go the way of his host, preferring to remain silent amidst the feeling of despair and helplessness.

But the lack of audible sound is just too much for the usually sweet-talking fighter of crime.

"So, this is it. Ready to throw in the towel?"

"Under the circumstances, I have all the reason to give up. Superman did." The Batman sluggishly remarked.

"Why? What happened to the big guy anyway?" inquired Dick, suddenly finding a topic interesting enough, in a morbid sense of speaking.

"You know Lois, his wife, right? She was fatally injured when a car-sized meteorite crashed near her apartment building. For some reason she didn't die immediately, so poor Clark had to watch her suffer. He wasn't able to do a blessed thing about it since the meteors turned out to have traces of kryptonite in them... took away most of his powers."

Dick Grayson sensed a crack in Batman's voice, something that he never expected from his iron-willed comrade, former mentor, and friend. It all the more made the costumed crimefighter dread to hear what happened next. But he felt he had to know.

"And?"

"Euthanasia." The sullen figure answered softly. "Then he exposed himself to the meteor. It didn't take much for the radiation to kill him."

Nightwing felt his knees turn to jelly upon hearing the greatest of them all pushed to committing murder before taking his own life in utter despair. He knows the situation is bleak, but only then did he realize how desperate things have become after hearing what happened to Superman. He was near to tears when the Batman spoke once

more.

"Wish he had waited a little while longer."

Perplexed by this strange remark, Nightwing turned a questioning look at his former partner. Then a blinding flash of light shot out from behind them, a light that dimmed down as quickly as it appeared, to reveal the figure of Waverider together with three others. Dick recognized the three as allies: Batman's current partner Robin a.k.a. Tim Drake, the former programmed killer now turned crimefighter Azrael, and the avenging angel known as the Huntress, who is Helena Bertinelli in her civilian life.

Dick threw a meaningful glance at the Huntress, who promptly returned the gesture by curtly turning away from him. It was not long ago that these two found it convenient to join forces in pursuit of a mob triggerman suspected of murdering an undercover police officer. They actually found it too convenient a partnership, something that fueled the deep-seated need of the two lonely crimefighters to belong to someone in a special way. It would have been a nice relationship, Nightwing thought. But their differing principles eventually squashed the budding romance before it even got the chance to take off. Besides, Batman would never approve of it.

Another thing felt wrong with Dick Grayson. He knows that Azrael and Robin are privy to the fact that Bruce Wayne is Batman, and is used to his mentor removing his cowl in front of these two. But revealing his true identity to the Huntress? Batman has always thought that the vindictive vigilante's methods leave much to be desired. That's why he never really considered her as part of the team, her vigilante activities more tolerated than welcomed, and very much closely surveilled lest Helena makes a mistake and screws things up for the rest of them. It seems a crisis this huge can push even the Batman to such desperate measures.

But the protector of Bludhaven had absolutely no idea who the time guardian is.

At that point Bruce Wayne stood up and faced the newcomers. "Dick, I don't believe you've met Waverider."

"Haven't had the pleasure" retorted the confused Nightwing, who hesitantly offered his hand to the stranger in front of him.

After some brief pleasantries, Waverider explained to Nightwing how, according to his knowledge, he accidentally messed up the flow of history, leading to the catastrophe that destroyed the earth. He further stressed that he cannot allow other superpowered metahumans to undo his mistake since he doesn't want to damage history further by introducing superpowers to an era when it is practically unknown. That's why he chose to aid in his mission agents like the five of them, who have no metahuman powers to speak of except for their exceptional abilities in martial arts.

The time-keeper then deferred to the Batman to lay out a plan to correct the situation.

"The plan is simplicity in itself. All we need to do is keep the battling Waverider and Era away from the woman, so that she can go ahead and commit suicide" Bruce Wayne explained with slight traces of

apprehension in his voice. Everyone knows the reason for his strong discomfort towards his own plan, a scheme that meant having to watch a human being die and not being allowed to save her. All his life, the Batman dedicated everything he has to saving and preserving life as much as his abilities would permit. They all understand how excruciating it would be for him to watch someone die without doing anything about it.

"Remember, we have no margin of error." Waverider warned his allies. "I can only afford one round trip for all of you. If we miss, there will be no second chances."

The five stalwart heroes agreed. And after some final preparations, Waverider used his chronal powers to transport them to the 16th century.

However, at the final second of his transport procedure, the mightiest Linear Man was taken aback by an energy backlash that spoiled his aim. He was horrified upon realizing that he missed his target by a factor of plus ten years, flinging the five heroes to the year 1598 instead of his intended year of 1588. Scurrying to find the cause of his error, the time guardian found himself facing a foe whom he thought long gone: Extant. In one swift move, the villain used his powers to imprison Waverider in a chronal energy cube, from which the time guardian is unable to break free.

"You fool! I'm surprised you didn't even realize that all these are my handiwork." The nefarious time vandal derided Waverider. "But don't worry, I'll let you watch your bumbling human friends as they get forever lost in a time when they can do NOTHING to prevent the disaster which I instigated."

Then it all came to the helpless time-keeper. Only he knows that Era, the one with whom he fought the battle that started it all, is really the daughter of Extant. Somehow, he must be responsible for breaking her free from her other-dimensional prison. And somehow, he manipulated the events to make his daughter fire that energy blast towards the woman he rescued. By saving her life, Waverider fell into a most elaborate trap set by Extant to make him an unwitting accomplice to his arch-enemy's plans of ultimately destroying the world.

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\*\*\*\*\*Mar 20, 1598\*\*\*\*\*

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Sophitia Alexandra, the youthful daughter of a local Greek baker, awoke with a start when she felt an uncanny tingle causing great disturbance to her soul. She threw a quick yet loving glance at the man sleeping soundly beside her. It has been only a few months since she came back from her second quest of the evil sword Soul Edge, an endeavor that postponed her heartfelt desire of being united in spirit with her lover, Rothion. But it's all in the past now, and finally the young Greek warrior can enjoy the bliss of sharing her life with the man whom she had just recently married.

But at this moment, with this mysteriously dark cognition enveloping her being, Sophitia feared that her blithe life might be threatened

anew by another impending task that will certainly take her away from her husband, albeit temporarily. Quietly getting up from the bed, she tip-toed her way towards the end of the room, where a heavy wooden chest lay adorned with trinkets and memorabilia she collected from her past voyages. Deftly lifting the top open, the warrior's fears were confirmed when she saw her Omega sword glowing with mystic energy that can only come from a supernatural source nearby. Danger is lurking terribly close.

The cool air is further chilled by frigid winds blown from the northern coasts of the Mediterranean. But Sophitia seems oblivious to the debilitating coldness, as she watched with eagle eyes the approach of a yet unrecognizable shadow stalking the perimeters of the small village where she resides. Turning from observer to predator, she traverses a circular path to bring herself behind the incognito stalker, utilizing stealth skills that could shame even the most accomplished ninja assassins of the eastern world. Finally, Sophitia stands only a few feet from her quarry, close enough for her to recognize the intruder.

"You are definitely slipping. Don't tell me you're unaware that I've been lurking behind you for the past two minutes."

The intruder suddenly turned around and in the blink of an eye, flung razor-sharp shurikens towards the Greek warrior. Sophitia had only a fraction of a second to react, as she quickly swung her Elk shield in front of her to parry the lightning fast attack of her opponent. But the throw blades never even came close to hitting their target, striking a defenseless tree instead. Sophitia smiled, not even remotely surprised that such an accomplished warrior as the one she faces would actually miss a target.

"Nice aim. Poor tree." The Greek girl mockingly remarked at her assailant, who finally spoke out to her with a firm but generally gentle female voice that is only all too familiar to her.

"If I really wanted to, you wouldn't even see me coming. Drop your weapon."

"You have no idea what you're getting into." Sophitia quipped as she gently lowered her sword and shield.

"On the contrary, I do. Did I just disturb your precious slumber, little lady? Frankly, I suggest that you stay away from your bed. You've been sleeping too much you're actually starting to put on some weight, girl." Remarked the shadowy female, exercising her turn to mock the Greek girl.

"Oh yeah, thanks a lot!" reacted Sophitia to the condescending remark as she crossed her arms, accompanied by a smirk in her face. "It's good to see you too, Taki."

"Same here, my friend." The Japanese warrior maiden cheerfully replied as she greeted her friend with a warm embrace, to which Sophitia responded with fervor.

The two female combatants spent the next hour reminiscing about their past adventures. It would have been a joyous reunion for the two who were most instrumental in defeating the demonic knight known as Inferno, the second evil soul who wielded the sinister Soul Edge



after the Spanish pirate Captain Cervantes De Leon. But then, Taki had to let her friend know about the reason why she came back.

"I know this is going to be quite hard to grasp, but I do have reason to believe that Cervantes has come back from the grave."

"No, it can't be!" retorted the horrified Sophitia. "I was there, I saw how you killed him. Not even he can possibly survive your Mekki-maru."

"I know. But legend has it that the evil twin blade Soul Edge can resurrect the body of anyone of its wielders. Even if Soul Edge is destroyed, the spawn blades have enough power to accomplish the task." Explained the female ninja, to which Sophitia promptly rebutted.

"But isn't it true that the Mekki-maru is the only spawn blade? Don't tell me someone stole it from you."

"Of course not. I would rather die than see someone else take hold of Mekki-maru. But the thing is, she's not the only blade that is known to be a child of the Soul Edge." Taki continued. "There is another one, the one that is called the Ivy Blade."

At that point it became clear to Sophitia. The Ivy blade is the weapon of choice by another female warrior who participated in the second quest for the evil sword: the English noblewoman Isabella Valentine. She was devastated upon learning that she's only an adopted child of the Valentine family. After her foster parents died, she set off to find the demonic blade in hopes of discovering her true roots, in the process calling herself Ivy. She then allied herself with the azure knight known as Nightmare, who was really a doppelganger of the German gladiator Siegfried (himself a participant of the two quests). Ivy, not knowing that it was really the Soul Edge which Nightmare uses as his weapon, requested the blue knight to bolster the power of her snake sword with his own. Thus, the Ivy Blade was born, a weapon bearing unusual powers because of its origin of being derived from the evil sword.

"Alright, I understand" concurs Sophitia. "But if what you say is correct, why in the world would Ivy do something as crazy as resurrecting Cervantes?"

"Because Ivy suspects that Cervantes is her real father. And for that matter, so do I." Taki retorted.

"Wait, wait slow down." The Athenian girl tried to decelerate her friend's train of thought. "First, Cervantes is back from the grave, or will soon be back from the grave. And Ivy is the one who did it or who's going to do it. That's fine, I can deal with it." Sophitia slowly recapped. "But the really mind-blowing part that I just can't comprehend is your claim that Cervantes is Ivy's real father. How in heavens did you come up with a conclusion like that???"

"Didn't you feel it?" Taki shot back at Sophitia. "Ivy has the very same spiritual aura as Cervantes'. I detected it during the second quest, and again when I stumbled on to her some time ago while I was spying in Nightmare's fortress during the night of that foolhardy raid staged by Kilik, Xianghua and Maxi." Further explained the lady ninja.

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\_(Author's note: For the source of all this information, please refer to the Soul Blade sequel Soul Calibur web site at [www.soulcalibur.com](http://www.soulcalibur.com).)\_

"N no." replied the confused Athenian dame. "I did feel something familiar about Ivy when we all fought Inferno. But I just dismissed it as some kind of deja vu." Sophitia added.

"Well, it really doesn't matter, now that we're all back to square one." Taki retorted.

"All..?" Sophitia quizzically remarked.

"Don't be naïve, Sophie. You know that when word of this gets out, all of our usual rowdy friends will try their luck again to seize control of the evil sword. And gosh, that means I may have to lay my eyes on that annoying girl again" Taki's voice gradually softened to a mutter.

"Who, Seung Mina?" Inquired the Hellenic warrior girl.

"Who else?" the female ninja snapped back with her eyes rolling in agitation. "I get so irritated by her penchant for always, always challenging everyone to a fight with that ludicrous long blade of hers. I mean, how egocentric can someone get?"

"I don't know." answered Sophitia. "Maybe you should ask your pompous mercenary friend."

"Who, that pig Mitsurugi? Excuse me, Sophie. Just because we're both Japanese doesn't make him my friend. Besides, I heard he's in hiding right now, so I don't think we'll be seeing his hide for a very long time."

"Yeah, must have finally realized he made too many enemies than he can handle." Sophitia laughed. Then the Greek damsel lowered her head as if a great sadness had befallen her.

"What's wrong?" inquired her Japanese confidant.

"I understand why you're here, and I also understand that it is our duty to make sure that this time the evil sword and anyone who wields it are destroyed once and for all." Sophitia paused for a couple of seconds before continuing. "But I just got married. And the thought of being away from my husband, even for a short time, just it just breaks my heart. I realize you may never understand how I feel but forgive me, I just can't help it. Things are not how they were before anymore."

Taki didn't answer. She knows what her Hellenic friend meant about never understanding how she feels. The last time these two warriors saw each other, they had a heated debate about Sophitia's plans of marrying her lover Rothion. And Sophitia knows only too well what brought Taki to this kind of attitude towards men and love, as she is aware of the ninja's painful experience of losing her beloved aunt ten years ago, because of this so called love.'

She can't exactly say that she understands Taki, but Sophitia has grown to love her friend after Taki rescued her from certain death in the hands of Captain Cervantes during the first quest. Since then, the two developed an immeasurable degree of respect and regard towards each other. Sophitia was pondering on these very things when Taki broke the silence.

"It's alright if you don't wish to come. I'm really more effective working alone, anyway. Just thought you might want to make sure that the task gets done right this time."

"You're kidding, right? You know I'd never allow you to face that menace alone. And besides, I do owe you my life." Sophitia said as she pledged Taki her assistance.

The lady ninja gave her friend a few hours to prepare and say goodbye to her husband, after which the two went on their way, again to further add on to the already rich pages of history.

"Taki"

"Yes, Sophie?"

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way. But I'm pretty sure the day will come when you'd feel the same happiness I'm feeling right now with Rothion."

"In your dreams, sister." Taki shot back in rebuttal. "If that happens, I'll eat Rekki-maru's sheath."

"You're on, sister!" Sophitia snarled back at Taki in acceptance of her challenge.

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Mar 25, 1598

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The sub-zero winds have so far been unusually mild, but the cold temperatures are still an ordeal to bear for the lone figure trekking across the vast and frigid Tibetan plateaus. The only sound that can be heard in these barren wastelands is the crisp crunching noise made by the voyager's heavy boots crushing the thin layer of snow on the icy ground, intermingling with the faint growl from his stomach that bids him to find something to eat, fast.

Happening on a nearly frozen lake, the Oriental warrior known to his peers in the Korean Coastal Defense Force as Commander Hwang Sung-Kyung fashioned a makeshift spear from a nearby tree. Crouching quietly along the shoreline, a slight movement in the still water caught the cunning gladiator's attention. And in the blink of an eye, he plunged the sharp end of his spear into the frigid waters once. When he pulled it out, a huge fish flailed on its end. With the damp woods rendering him unable to create a wood fire, the poor Korean had to do with eating the fish raw.

Annoyed by this inconvenient situation, Hwang recalled in his mind

the last time he ever spoke to anyone, which was two months ago at the Seung family residence back in Korea. He had just come back from his second quest of the evil sword Soul Edge, and was looking forward to a good night's sleep after a grueling voyage across the north China Sea. But before he even got the chance to rest his bruised back against a soft bed, a messenger came sending a summons for him to appear before his mentor and friend, the much honored Seung Han Myong.

The revered teacher recounted to his former student how his daughter, the impulsive teen-ager Seung Mina, ran away from home again after hearing about a rumor of another evil blade from an Italian merchant. Hwang didn't even flinch upon hearing this despite the fact that he witnessed how the female ninja Taki delivered the telling blow that laid waste the last of the two evil blades; he was just too tired to entertain the idea of hunting for a third one. But knowing that the youthful Mina is again out in the world, in danger from other unscrupulous scavengers as well as from herself, kept him up for the most part of the night.

Hwang's recollection was interrupted by a rabbit dashing right in front of him. Getting up on his feet, the adroit warrior decided to continue on his trek.

"Oh Mina, if I didn't love you so much I wouldn't be caught dead in this place" Hwang muttered to himself.

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April 20, 1598

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Dick Grayson slowly lifted his throbbing head after what seemed to have been a million year slumber. Still disoriented, he moved by instinct and first checked to see if he's injured in any way. Finding nothing worthy of alarm except for a shallow gash in his left forearm, the man who calls himself Nightwing slowly started to come out of his daze to see the unconscious form of the youthful Tim Drake. Nightwing was relieved to feel his pulse beating normally.

Deciding to forego waking Tim up, he checked the surrounding terrain. It was almost nighttime, and the darkness is falling down like an ominous curtain as swiftly as the temperature drops. His attention is again pulled towards the boy crimefighter known as Robin, who at that time has just begun to regain consciousness. Just then, Nightwing felt something wrong, as he quickly pulled his confused companion towards a thick, bushy plant growth to hide themselves from an approaching convoy. He clutched his forehead in dismay when he heard the conversation of the traveling party.

"Just our luck" he muttered. "that Waverider guy missed. This is France, not Japan!"

The gradually recovering Robin overheard what he said. "What? Does this mean we're lost?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so." Answered Nightwing with a weary tone in his voice. At that point he realized that their other companions, Batman, Azrael and Huntress were not with them. "I wonder what happened to those three"

"Geez, what a mess. We're lost in time and separated from the boss." Tim Drake answered back, obviously referring to the Dark Knight. "So what do we do now?"

Nightwing turned to his juvenile companion whom he considers as a little brother figure. "First of all we have got to get rid of these costumes and all our gadgets. We can't be seen walking around dressed like this, we have to blend in."

"Yeah, sure. Like we don't know what's going to happen to us here. Can't we at least use the comm-link to contact the others?" complained the now worried youngster.

"No. It's too risky. Even the slightest hint of 20th century technology being used in this era might set off a chain of events that could only make things worse. We have to depend on ourselves using this current time's means."

Robin paused in deep thought for a few seconds before giving his nod. "Alrighty then. Guess for now we have to relegate ourselves to being clothesline thieves, huh." He replied, then muffled a chuckle, obviously amused at the thought.

Meanwhile, at almost the same moment, a drunken harbor worker is starting to lose it after downing at least a dozen whiskey jiggers in a small tavern in Paris. His Japanese drinking partner tried to keep him from stirring up a frenzy, but to no avail. The henchman had already flung the bartender towards the liquor shelves lining the back of the oak-paneled bar, and is now threatening all the other bar patrons with his oversized dagger.

"I wouldn't draw a blade out if I were you." A voice speaking in strained English suddenly rang out from behind him.

The intoxicated thug turned around to see a medium yet solidly built man wearing a loose, ashen colored sack cloth coat and hung down trousers made of the same material. There doesn't seem to be anything extraordinary about this stranger, except for his features being clearly Asian. The man's face is almost emotionless, yet his left hand is balled tight while his right one hovers closely over a black leather sheath which measure at least a yard and a half long.

The troublemaker's Oriental friend felt his blood curdle, and his face turned pale white after recognizing the bold intruder who appears to be challenging his drunken companion. Pulling the wide-shouldered man beside, his beleaguered cohort tried to dissuade him from engaging the newcomer to a sword fight.

"Porthos, don't do it! I know this man. He's Heishiro Mitsurugi, the most feared swordsman of the east."

"He will fear me after I'm through with him!" the recreant barked back before pushing aside the frightened Japanese.

"That's right." Mitsurugi quipped in Japanese. "Do me a favor and

don't try to stop your friend. It's been ages since my katana tasted raw flesh."

Without warning, the drunk suddenly lunged at the mercenary and swung his knife, only to be surprised after realizing that he hit nothing but air. And before he could react, a thundering kick sent him crashing through the row of tables, bowling on them like so much tenpin. Mitsurugi then hovered on top of the now terrified thug, ready to deliver the death blow with his razor sharp sword.

But then, the samurai bounty hunter felt a powerful grip around his neck, which pulled him off his prey with such force that it sent him careening across the other end of the tavern.

"There will be no bloodshed while I'm around." Declared yet another stranger garbed with a heavy woolen cape with a complementing hood.

Raging with a fury that he never felt before, Mitsurugi growled like an animal as he rushed blade-first at the hooded stranger who dared humiliate him. The man's hands moved with lightning speed, slapping Mitsurugi's sword at the broad side to knock it off it's deadly course. A quick elbow to the Japanese warrior's chin sent him reeling back, more surprised at his opponent's quickness than hurt by his counter-attack. Mitsurugi held back, realizing that he now faces not an ordinary adversary.

"Ah, a worthy opponent at last. May I have the pleasure of your name, sir, before I run you down?" Mitsurugi spoke at the stranger with all the respect of one warrior to another, while smiling savagely as he wiped the blood off his mouth.

The hooded stranger, who is in fact the time-lost voyager Bruce Wayne a.k.a. the Batman, replied with a curt but firm remark. "My name is of no use to you."

"A stranger ashamed of his own name, I see. Have it your way, then. I am Heishiro Mitsurugi, the mightiest swordsman in the world, and I am honored to make your acquaintance. Now, shall we continue our little tussle?"

"No, we shall not. I simply don't have time for this." With that, the Batman turned his back on his flabbergasted opponent, and quietly made his way towards the door.

"Don't turn your back on me!" Mitsurugi shouted at him. Batman then made a dash outside the tavern with the warrior in pursuit. He knows at this point a fight with this blood-thirsty mercenary is inevitable. But at least he would draw the battle away from innocent bystanders.

Nearby, Nightwing and Robin were cautiously strutting by when they heard the sound of clashing metal and grunting combatants.

"Sounds like trouble. Let's go check it out." Whispered the Boy Wonder as he ran ahead of his companion.

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**\*\*April 21, 1598\*\***

"That street looks too crowded, let's go this way." Helena Bertinelli instructed her comrade. To her annoyance, he continued on his path towards the cluster of peasant people crowding around a market place. The woman who is also the vigilante called Huntress opted to keep her cool, reminding herself that her companion, Jean Paul Valley, a fellow crimefighter who hides under the alter ego Azrael, is most of the time lost in his thoughts, an after effect of the exercise to overcome the programming instilled to his subconscious by the evil Order of St. Dumas, that initially turned him into the most efficient assassin in the world.

Deep inside her, Helena was trying to control a resentment that she's feeling towards her companion. Robin clued her in with some background about Azrael: a lost soul who from the start was brainwashed by the dark, medieval order to become a merciless killer; and later was chosen by the Batman, amidst strong protestations by Nightwing and Robin himself, as his temporary replacement to carry on the mantle of the bat after he was seriously injured by the revenge-driven Bane. The way she looks at it, Azrael is much more a loose cannon than she ever was at any time in both of crimefighting careers. And Batman trusts him more than he does her?

Huntress gently taps him on the shoulder and made a sign to follow her towards a modest inn located in the heart of this small Italian town. The duo had just come from a night long trek by foot after finding themselves in a forest. They had likewise hid their 20th century paraphernalia and changed to make themselves appear inconspicuous in a time and place where they realized that their primary mission objective of correcting the mishap in time has met with severe failure.

A couple of hours before the break of dawn, Jean Paul restlessly lay on a tattered feather bed in one of the inn rooms. The disheveled soul was about to fall asleep when he felt a presence lurking behind the door leading to the seedy hallway. He had just enough time to prepare himself before the door came down with a loud crash to reveal a huge man wielding an even bigger battle ax. Azrael braced himself for combat.

"I never thought our paths will cross again, Siegfried," the man's voice thundered. "But it seems providence has given me a means to cure my ward. Now you will help me find Ivy or I'll make sure that you will never be fit enough to get in my way again like you did before."

Unknown to the two crimefighters, the American beast warrior Rock had been following them the whole night long after happening on the two while he was passing by Italy on his way back to Spain.

The hulking gladiator had just come back from his second campaign to destroy the Soul Edge, and he was just too happy to be reunited with his friend and adopted son, the native American boy Bangoo. But Rock got home only to find his ward inflicted with a strange disease, which his village's medicine men were unable to treat. Upon the advice of the village elder, Rock decided to journey again, this time to search for the Englishwoman Isabella Valentine and ask her to use her Ivy blade to heal Bangoo. Actually, Rock had originally intended

to find Taki, since her Mekki-maru sword wields the same power as that of the Ivy blade. But he wasn't able to find her in her usual sanctuary in Kyoto.

Upon setting eyes on Jean Paul Valley, Rock mistook him for the German knight Siegfried because of the uncanny resemblance between the two. Deciding that he would greatly save time if Siegfried helps him (on account of his mistaken notion that Siegfried and Ivy have developed a deep affinity), Rock deemed it necessary to coerce his sometimes adversary into giving his assistance, knowing how disdainful and uncooperative the German warrior can be when dealing with his rival blade wielders. Up until now, he has not realized yet that he got the wrong man.

The heavily-built combatant's attention was so fixed at whom he thought was his prey that he didn't notice Azrael's partner, the Huntress, using her unparalleled stealth skills to sneak up on the usually alert Rock. Before he knew it, Huntress had already slapped a rigid sleeper hold around his neck. Rock tried desperately to shake her off his back by slamming their fused bodies against the four mildew-infested walls of the seedy chamber, but the former mob daughter's grip was just too strong. Eventually, the struggling behemoth was knocked unconscious due to oxygen deprivation.

After a half hour, Rock was already profusely apologizing to Jean Paul after realizing his mistake. Still dizzy from what Huntress did to him, the American brave watched intently as the fierce woman who had previously rendered him helpless now acts as a kind-hearted caretaker as she labored to nurse him back to normal strength.

"A ferocious warrior woman in combat, and yet an immensely gentle soul." Rock spoke out. "You know, you do remind me of someone."

"Yeah?" answered Helena with a smile, mainly intended to hide her disgust at the seeming attempt of the huge man to come on to her. "Men you are all the same no matter what time period you're in." Helena thought to herself.

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The sun was just about peeking over the horizon as two figures continued to struggle to get the better of each other in a duel that had stretched for hours now. Both of them nearing the point of exhaustion, the Batman and Mitsurugi stubbornly refused to give an opening, since they both know that one moment of carelessness could spell defeat for them. Especially for the Japanese samurai warrior, who doesn't mind dying as much as he does being bettered by an unarmed opponent.

Mitsurugi thought he would have already flattened Batman a couple of hours back if he hadn't underestimated the stranger. For someone who battles without the benefit of a weapon, he is surprised at the toughness of his adversary, mainly stemming from the fact that the Batman is an undisputed master of all forms of martial arts known to man in the 20th century.

On the other hand, the crimefighter was also thinking that he would already have sacked his obstinate adversary. He knows of at least a hundred ways of doing so, but he has never fought someone who is so



attached to his weapon like Mitsurugi is. Many times Batman executed crushing blows that in normal situations would have already disarmed the other combatant. But to his dismay, Mitsurugi's katana seems to be literally fused to his hands. Nothing he has done so far had been successful in knocking the blade out of his opponent's grip.

Just a few feet away, Nightwing and Robin sat under a tree while watching the two gladiators exchange blows. Previously, they were worried that Mitsurugi might be able to slip in a lucky attack and seriously injure Batman. But now, after waiting for hours for this battle to conclude, Dick and Tim have grown extremely bored.

"Don't try to help me' he says. This won't take long' he says. Geez, Bruce should know better than to mix it up with this primitive ego-tripper." Dick Grayson ranted to no one in particular.

"I'm hungry. Can't we tell those two to stop for breakfast?" complained the already annoyed Tim Drake, while slowly moving his left hand in circles over his abdominal area.

Unknown to the four, two watchful pairs of eyes have been observing them for the last five minutes. One of them, the Greek warrior girl Sophitia, is trying to muffle a giggle while her companion-friend Taki is intently watching the stranger who at that moment had just executed a butterfly maneuver to fend off an overhead slash attack from his opponent.

"Golly, I'd give up my Omega sword just to see Mitsurugi's face after this man beats his gargantuan ego out of his thick head." Sophitia chuckled.

"Quiet, Sophie." Taki whispered back. "This stranger is good very good. I've never seen anyone stand up against Mitsurugi using only his bare hands."

"So, you trying to tell me that we should help your compatriot?"

"Let's wait for a few more minutes." Taki does not in any way have any particular liking to the arrogant samurai mercenary. But having once fought alongside Mitsurugi, the female ninja would still choose to side with him any time rather than to pledge favor over a stranger whom she knows nothing about. The two lady warriors silently bore witness as the Batman and Mitsurugi started to buckle in exhaustion but still refused to give in as they both tried to push each other to the brink of defeat.

Then Taki decided she has waited for as long as she must. Drawing a razor sharp throw blade, she deftly takes careful aim at Batman's deltoid muscles.

Nightwing himself felt it's time to stop this lengthy and senseless tussle. But as he was about to get up, a shimmer of sunlight was momentarily reflected from a nearby metallic object and glanced the side of his eyes. The crimefighter had only a fraction of a second to react as he quickly flung his body to catch a speeding shuriken hurling toward the Batman's back.

"Aaahhhh!" Nightwing groaned as the sharp blades of the shuriken penetrated his unprotected palm. His action caught the attention of

the two combatants, who for the first time in hours, paused to turn their attention towards the cause of the interruption in their melee. That's when the two female warriors decided to reveal themselves to the four. Mitsurugi's jaw dropped in astonishment upon seeing Taki and Sophitia.

"You'll owe us one after this, Heishiro." Taki said to the bewildered samurai while flashing a smile peppered with pure condescension.

"\_Kiena\_, you witch! I don't need your help!" Mitsurugi yelled at the lady ninja. Taki's smile just turned even more scornful.

"I'm glad you appreciate our aid, Mitsurugi." Sophitia shot back at the samurai with an even more audible streak of sarcasm. "Taki, maybe we should go. We're obviously not needed here."

But Taki wasn't listening to Sophitia, as her attention was fixed on the man clutching his bleeding hand while trying to pull out a bloodied throw blade from it. Her amazement towards these strangers grew even more intense. First, the hooded one proved more than capable of engaging Mitsurugi in battle, unarmed. Now his companion turned out an incredible display of skill and quickness in catching her shuriken in mid-air. Her assessment of their skills sent a slight chill through her lithe body, something that she has never felt before in her life. Taki tried to fight the urge to ask Nightwing how he was able to do what he did, as she watched the young Robin attend to his wounded comrade.

Sophitia, the Greek girl gladiator, realized what captivated Taki's attention. Her reaction to the situation, however, was more tangible, as her kind heart prevailed over her penchant for battle. She slowly approached Nightwing and took his hand, bandaging it with a strip of white cloth that she pulled out from her travel pouch. That's when she noticed his features which are clearly not Caucasian.

"You're not from around here, are you?" the Athenian warrior asked Dick. "You look different, almost like my friend here." Sophitia further commented, referring to Nightwing's somewhat Asian features which slightly resemble Taki's.

Seeing Sophitia's display of kindness, Batman realized that the two newcomers are not hostile, which prompted him to relax a little bit. Opting to continue on their way though not being sure of their destination, the Dark Knight began to gather his things, only to be interrupted by the sword-wielding mercenary.

"Wait! We're not finished yet!" Mitsurugi yelled at his enigmatic opponent.

Batman realized that he has to find some way to get Mitsurugi off his back, since fighting him for the last nine hours turned out to be the most unproductive hours of his life. As Mitsurugi stood in front of him, the Caped Crusader spoke out with a low tone of voice.

"A million apologies for having to cut our engagement short. But I'm afraid my luck might run out soon if I continue to fight against a superior adversary like yourself."

"Don't patronize me." Mitsurugi snarled back at the Dark Knight. "A

true warrior does not accept defeat that easily. Stay and fight."

"For the first time, I may have to agree with you, Mitsurugi, " Sophitia suddenly butted in. "But not about this silly macho thing."

She then turned to Batman and spoke with a calm and gentle voice. "Contrary to what you may be trying to make your adversary believe, I know your skills and that of your companions are great and mighty. My friend, Taki, and I are on a journey to save the souls of those we love dearly, and we could certainly use your help in accomplishing our mission."

Taki threw a wide-eyed dagger look at her friend. She was totally surprised by Sophitia asking the outlanders for help. But the Hellenic warrior just ignored her Japanese confidant and waited for Batman's reply.

"What makes you think you could trust us?" retorted the unmoving Dark Knight.

"I'm not sure. But judging by how you fought Mitsurugi, you have enough skills to end the battle quickly by killing him. But you did not. You're apparent aversion to taking another human being's life is enough reason for me to trust you."

Batman eyed Sophitia intently. He didn't want to admit it, but he was effectively disarmed by the Greek girl's purity of spirit and intention; traits that are not very common for people with double-bladed swords and combat shields in their possession.

Sophitia went on to explain to Batman and his companions the danger posed by another incarnation of the dreaded evil sword. Though the three of them are not accustomed to dealing with supernatural threats, it didn't take much for the 20th century crimefighters to offer their aid after recognizing the immensity of the menace to innocent people's lives. Who knows, they might even find a way to remedy the predicament that they found themselves in.

"Hmph, so that's why you two wrecking crews are together again. Well, you can count me out this time. I'm not interested anymore in chasing after that one-eyed bastard and his silly-looking blade." Mitsurugi quipped while packing up his stuff, obviously referring to the frightful pirate Captain Cervantes.

Sophitia stared at her sometimes comrade-in-arms with a disappointed look in her eyes. "We could really use your help here, Mitsurugi. I've felt the threat of Soul Edge twice over, but this time is different. I fear that this time around, all our skills may not be enough to destroy the enemy."

The samurai mercenary remained silent as he continued to prepare for his departure. All his life as a swordsman, Heishiro Mitsurugi has never encountered an enemy powerful enough to introduce him to the experience called defeat. As the mightiest samurai ever to come out of any Japanese warrior clan, he rarely faced a threat that called for everything he knows about fighting and survival. One of the very rare exceptions was the Chinese assassin Li Long, the nunchaku

fighter who battled him to a stalemate, and then later fought alongside him to vanquish Captain Cervantes. That was all before he witnessed with his own eyes how his equal as a combatant was handily defeated and murdered by the immortal plunderer.

The mercenary didn't want to admit it, but deep inside he knows that he has finally come face-to-face with fear. He is afraid to face in battle the one foe that he knows has the power to defeat him easily. It's not so much a fear of dying, but more of the fear to experience being beaten by an opponent who wields fighting prowess far superior to his own.

"You cannot force a person if he does not wish to help." Taki spoke out while throwing a contemptuous look at Mitsurugi. For some reason, the samurai felt the ninja's eyes burning right through his being. But he tried to ignore it as he turned his back on them and went on his way.

Meanwhile, Sophitia set her gear down to the soft grass under the refreshing shade of a tall tree. "I could really use something to eat. Anyone care for some bread?"

"Ahh, finally, someone who understands my needs!" Robin sighed as he eagerly accepted Sophitia's offering.

"Looks like there's not enough there for all of us." Commented Taki as she examined her friend's travel pouch. "Sophie, let's go hunt for something to cook."

"Taki, you know how I feel about killing animals. Why don't you just pick some berries or something." Pleaded the Greek damsel, her lips pouting like a child in a futile attempt to reason to her friend.

"Oh you bleeding heart pet lover if you don't want to come, then fine. I'll go hunt alone." The ninja shot back as she made sure her psi blade is in place.

Nightwing then stood up to go after Taki. "Wait, miss uh whatever, I believe this belongs to you."

Taki turned around to see a smiling Nightwing handing her the shuriken that previously left a nasty cut in his palm. She felt strange as she took back her throw blade; this is the first time that Taki has ever met a man who doesn't feel intimidated around her presence.

Even when she was still under the tutelage of her mentor and foster father, Master Toki, the young Taki tried very hard to repulse the advances of her male colleagues by assuming a fearsome man-hater personality. There was even a time when she almost killed a persistent suitor while scrimmaging with him in one of their training sessions. Her teacher has always thought that Taki is perhaps one of the prettiest girls he has ever had the pleasure of training in the deadly art of ninjitsu. But he felt that her beauty had only come to waste after being hidden behind her custom-made red ninja fighting gear and all her weapons.

These, coupled with her frightful demeanor towards those of the opposite sex, brought Taki to her desired reputation of being feared

and avoided by men, and she has since been used to that kind of treatment. However, this man who is currently in front of her has just broken the trend with his winsome smile and non-shaking hands while he stands dangerously close to the notorious man-hater. Taki is not accustomed to being treated this way. And right now, she just can't understand the feeling that has taken over her.

"Let me come and help you." The future-bound crimefighter offered Taki while he continued to flash his amiable smile.

It took some time before the lady ninja managed to push out some words of response. "N no. No, thank you. I'll be fine." She stammered before hurriedly turning her back to the man who has given her a much troubling feeling that somewhat resembles fear, but not exactly. Whatever it is, the lady ninja's reaction was that of utter alarm; her heart is pounding like crazy.

Dick Grayson was still training his thoughts on Taki while walking back to the makeshift camp. As he sat beside Sophitia, he blurted something out that made the Hellenic damsel chuckle with obvious delight.

"You know, your friend would look a lot prettier if she'd only remove her face mask." Nightwing confided to Sophitia, referring to the silken cloth covering Taki's face from the bridge of her nose downwards.

"I think it will be better if you tell her that yourself." Sophitia answered back.

"I tried but " Nightwing's words were cut short when he saw Batman gesturing him to approach. He quickly got up to move beside his former crimefighting partner, and was met by a very serious man with a very heavy word of caution.

"I saw that, Dick." Bruce Wayne softly but sternly whispered to the perplexed Nightwing. "And I'm sorry to say this, but you absolutely cannot do it here."

"Yeah, I know, sorry about that" concurred the younger of the two, acknowledging the danger his attempt for a personal involvement with the 16th century warrior posed. "You know, I think it would be better if we just cut our ties from these people."

"We have no choice. We need a way to get back to our time as well as find our missing friends. I think it's tolerable to join them. But I cannot allow any kind of involvement on a personal level. Is that clear?" Declared the Dark Knight, who once again assumed the role of team commander and superior over his former ward.

"Got it." Nightwing replied in full compliance. Being the first Robin and original sidekick of the Batman, he knows only too well that when this man starts to talk in this tone of voice, he expects nothing less than total obedience from everyone under his charge.

Nearby, Tim Drake caught a glance of his two companions whispering to each other. But he just ignored them to continue munching on the soft piece of bread that Sophitia gave him.

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\*\*May 02, 1598\*\*

An inn-keeper's attention was drawn to a heavily-cloaked figure coming through the doorway of the small traveler's lodge situated in the northern sector of the bustling city of Lisbon, Portugal, that he has maintained for the last 23 years. Not exactly the benevolent type, this inn-keeper is notorious for his open dealings with suspected thieves, bounty hunters and smugglers, undesirable elements of society who have made a haven out of his roadside inn.

He caught a slight whiff of jasmine as the newcomer, who turned out to be a lady, beckoned him for a room. After the guest quietly entered another door leading into the row of shabby and squalid chambers, two dingy-looking men approached the inn-keeper and began talking to him.

"Gaston, that's a mighty bountiful customer you just had walking into your cesspool." Garbled one of the two men while chewing on a tattered cigar.

"Yeahhhh!" Agreed the other one. "And did you see that thing juttin' out from her booty? Them look like gold if I ever saw one."

"You filthy rats!" Snarled the inn-keeper. "If only I wasn't doin' good business with your boss, I'd have already thrown you out into the streets!"

"Hah! You're welcome to try, old man." The bigger man replied arrogantly before continuing. "So what now, grandpa. Shall we do our thing?"

"You vermin are the reason why decent people don't come here." Complained the inn-keeper while turning away to retrieve a duplicate key from the wall closet.

"Hey, that's the joy of dealin' with the boss. Besides, decent people shouldn't live in this part of town." answered one of the two before they both walked through the same door the woman entered earlier.

Upstairs, the exquisite woman smiled as she heard footsteps coming from the hallway just outside her room. She then got up from the bed and assumed an inviting, almost seductive pose just before the door swung open to reveal the two hoodlums, who almost drooled at the delectable sight in front of them.

"Hello, boys. Wanna join me in paradise?" the woman spoke beguilingly at her two intruders.

Her voice resonated like it came from the bottom of a deep well, but the pair of thugs, overcome by sheer fleshly desire, didn't even notice it as they began to approach her slowly.

"Lady, we'll even join you in hell if that's what you want!"

"Really?" the lady answered in evident delight. "Funny, that's just

what I have in mind."

With that, the strange woman pulled a menacingly sharp, double-bladed sword from the golden sheath that initially attracted the attention of the two miscreants. It took only one swift and skillful swing to separate the heads of the two intruders from their bodies.

But the woman who calls herself Ivy is not yet finished. In her mind's eye, she watched as two incorporeal souls started to detach from the headless, twitching bodies.

"Boys, my sword is hungry. Feed her." The woman whispered as the screaming souls of her two victims were sucked into the double-edged weapon, after which she watched with wicked joy as her sword began to glow with devilish power.

"Hmm, you look pretty satisfied, my sweet." Ivy spoke to her sword. "It is quite delightful to occasionally feast on dark meat, isn't it?"

Her supernatural senses began to be stimulated more intensely as she felt her Ivy Blade giving off even more malevolent energy. Somewhere in her head, she heard a deep and sinister voice that seemed to originate from beyond the grave.

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"Ivy, come quickly and free me. I so long to be united with my one and only daughter."

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"Yes father, I'm coming. It won't be long now."

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May 03, 1598

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The thunderous roar of the crowd grew even louder as Hwang Sung-Kyung approached a majestic coliseum in the outskirts of the Italian territory. Reading a sign just outside of the establishment's main gate, the Korean patriot shrugged his shoulder upon confirming that the cause of the commotion is another fighting tournament not unlike the one he joined a few years back, where he was narrowly beaten by a tough Japanese lady ninja. Acting on a hunch, Hwang quietly sneaked past the gate-keeper, since he doesn't have enough money to pay for the entrance. Once inside, he watched intently as two struggling figures slugged it off in a furious yet dilettante match.

"Amateurs. If Mina were here, she'd easily bulldoze over these clumsy oafs." Hwang thought to himself.

He waited patiently for the battle to conclude; the only spectator among the audience who got bored at the way the fight progressed. Finally, Hwang stood in anticipation as the barker announced the participants of the next match. He didn't seem even half-surprised

when he saw Seung Mina emerge from the fighter's chamber to face a hulking behemoth wielding a jagged-edged ax.

The Korean warrior-soldier was momentarily alarmed upon setting eyes on Mina's opponent. "Astaroth? No, it's not him."

Hwang's concern didn't come without good reason. During the second quest for the evil twin sword, Astaroth was one of the diabolical gladiators he had to go through to endure the task. He barely survived his encounter with the huge warrior, whose participation in the quest was rumored to be part of a plan initiated by an evil sorcerer to claim the power of the Soul Edge for himself. And by the way he fought, it seemed that there is substance to the rumor that Astaroth's abilities originated from the same dark forces used by black magic wielders. Hwang has never faced anyone as nigh-invincible as him.

Hwang fixed his attention to the center ring just as soon as the fight started. Mina's opponent is undoubtedly strong, yet the immense weight of his weapon hindered him from executing moves fast enough to match the Korean lass' speed, as exhibited by the way she easily somersaulted away from his first swing, which created a loud thud when it hit the ground.

The commander of Korea's Coastal Defense Force can't help but smile in admiration when Mina displayed her exceptional skills in the fighting art of the Zanbato. Her quick acrobatic move instantly brought her behind her adversary. And before the giant could react, Seung Mina twirled her long spear in one hand, attacking her opponent with multiple blows in the head and body by the square end of her weapon. In the blink of an eye, the fight concluded with Mina's opponent falling unconscious on the ground, and the young lass was awarded with a standing ovation from the appreciative crowd.

Hwang only took a moment to join the applause of the fight fans, then proceeded to collect his quarry. "Show's over, Mina. Let's go home."

The girl warrior was surprised to see her suitor approaching. "Hwang? What are you doing here???"

"What do you think? Master Han-Myong is worried sick about you and has commissioned me to bring you back home." Answered the weary Hwang.

"Hmph, it's just like father not to trust me with anything." Mina whimpered as she faced Hwang. "And besides, what made you think I'd let you drag me back just like that?"

"Well, we could do it the same way as before, but we both know what the outcome is going to be so let's not waste our time anymore, okay?" Hwang shot back, referring to how the two of them wagered during the first quest, fighting to see who among them would go back to Korea and who would continue the journey. Back then, Mina lost to Hwang, but she didn't honor their agreement.

"Hah! Right. And you still think I'm the same impulsive and impatient fighter you know. Why don't we find out?" Mina challenged Hwang.



Hwang Sung-Kyung didn't answer, and instead grabbed Mina by her wrist and forcibly led her out of the arena. As they made their exit, a squad of sword-wielding henchmen blocked their way just outside the coliseum gate. Leading the thugs is an important-looking but diminutive man holding a scroll in one hand and a dagger in another.

"Hey you! Let her go. She has another fight lined up after sundown." Yelled the man, who happened to be the owner of the coliseum.

Mina childishly smirked at Hwang and crossed her arms smugly. She seems delighted that the fight owner appeared hell bent in not allowing him to take her away from the arena.

Hwang, remaining true to his character, respectfully yet firmly answered the fight owner. "I apologize for this inconvenience, sir. But this young lady is wanted by her father, and I intend to make sure that my master's word gets carried out no matter what."

"Are you a fighter too, young man?" the owner insolently asked Hwang. "Because if you are, then you can stay for as long as you want and participate in the contest. It's either that or you leave the kid behind and get the hell out of my property."

Ever since her early teens, Seung Mina has longed for freedom that her overprotective father, the master martial artist and teacher Seung Han-Myong, adamantly refused to grant her. Impulsive and arrogant, Mina once attempted to join the Korean Coastal Defense Force. But her ambition turned to anger when she was turned down due to the simple reason that she's a female; back during that time, the honor of defending Korea's territorial bounds are reserved only to male candidates. In her rage, the impetuous youth fought and seriously injured two of the Defense Force's best lieutenants. This prompted her father's friend, Defense Force over-all commander Admiral Lee Sun Shin, to exhort Seung Han-Myong to keep his daughter indoors at all times.

But this only made Mina's desire for freedom grow even more intense. At the age of 16, she heard about the legendary sword Soul Edge and Hwang being tasked to locate the said item. Wanting to prove herself and her skills to her father and her detractors, Seung Mina decided to run away from home and find the evil twin sword herself.

There had been two quests for the sword that Mina participated in. And in both events, she was frustrated by another warrior with whom she had the hardest time among all she had faced in combat: the lady ninja Taki. Her animosity towards her Japanese tormentor has ebbed a little since after they joined forces together with the other Blade hunters to thwart the evil Spanish pirate Captain Cervantes de Leon and the demonic spirit known only as Inferno. But in spite of fighting on the same side in the supernatural war, Seung Mina has never really forgiven the lady ninja for consistently calling her a baby'. If there's one thing that Mina hates, it's when people around her treat her like a child. Her father still does so. Taki might do so should they run into each other again.

Now this dwarfish fight promoter did the same thing when he called her kid.' And that just made Mina see red.

"Who are you calling a kid?!?" Screamed the enraged lass as she

pulled her spear out of its harness and pointed the sharp end towards the men blocking their path.

Hwang, seeing an opportunity to win Mina's favor over to himself, unsheathed his long blade. "I think you better let us pass. You wouldn't like it when my friend here is angry."

"Haw! There are only two of you against all of us. You insolent easterners are really getting on my nerves." Sneered the short man. Turning to his men, "I need a new batch of fish food, boys. Get to it."

Hwang and Mina braced themselves for battle. But to the duo's surprise, the thugs suddenly froze in place, as if in fear. And before Hwang and Mina could do anything, their opponents scampered away like silly scared rats whose hiding place was suddenly exposed, leaving two puzzled Koreans wondering why.

"Hmm, they must have been more scared of me than I thought." Mina remarked while flashing a huge grin.

"Yeah " Hwang replied, more in patronizing his young lady love than agreeing with her.

They were about to depart when they noticed an ominous shadow coming from behind them. Slowly turning around, the two were startled to see a huge man with the head of a strange beast, with narrow, squinting eyes and two sharp, hook-shaped appendages protruding from it which appear to be horns.

"EEEEEEEEKKK!!! A monster!" screamed Mina in utter shock. Hwang braced himself again and prepared to use his long blade. He would have delivered a deadly blow to the fearsome figure in front of him had he not recognized the big battle ax that the man is holding.

"Rock? Is that you?"

"Fancy meeting you here, my friend." Boomed the deep voice of the American journeyman.

During the first two quests, there had been a number of perilous situations wherein Rock and Hwang saved each other's life. The two share a common trait of innate benevolence that not only gave them a high degree of mutual respect, but also led to a friendship which grew in the midst of battle. Their bond, though handicapped by distance, is still almost comparable to that of Taki and Sophitia's. And Hwang couldn't be more glad to see his oversized friend once more.

"Saved my hide once more, Rock. It's good to see you again." Beamed the Korean warrior. "And you got yourself a new animal head." referring to the head gear Rock is wearing that covered his head and made him appear like a man-beast. "But what manner of beast is this?"

"Oh, this? I took from a creature that my family regularly hunts down for food and clothing. We don't have a name for this creature yet, so I just call it bison." answered the smiling behemoth.

The giant reciprocated his shorter friend's delight while Mina mused

at them from a short distance. Even though he still views Rock as a rival (as she does all the other Blade hunters), Seung Mina can't help but admit to herself the admiration she feels toward him. The Korean girl is not especially adept in the social graces, and she doesn't meet too many people who possess the kind of patience required to tolerate her infantile tantrums. Rock is one of the few who does. And every time she meets him, she is always reminded of the father who time and again she's compelled to disobey due to her rebellious nature. Mina would never show it, but she's nearly as glad to see Rock as Hwang is.

The Korean girl was so lost in thought that she didn't notice the two other people who came with Rock, until one of them, Azrael, spoke to her.

"That's a pretty interesting piece you have there. May I see it?" requested the Angel of Vengeance, wishing to inspect Mina's long spear.

"Who are you?" Mina reacted with a sense of hesitation.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce you to my companions." Rock butted in apology.

After a brief introduction, Azrael renewed his interest in examining Mina's long spear. The young lass was still reluctant to hand her weapon to a stranger, but a simple gesture from the American brave made her acquiesce.

"Hmm, impressive. I don't get to meet too many people who know the art of the Zanbato." Azrael commented, which gave Mina quite a surprise at his knowledge of the fighting art. "Are you as good as your weapon makes you appear to be?" added the crimefighter, which Mina took with a sense of condescension.

"You're welcome to find out, Az whatever." The young Korean quipped, as if accepting a challenge to a duel.

Rock, sensing a looming shadow of animosity between the two warriors, wisely made a quick subject change to nip the sprouting enmity in the bud. "My friends, though intruding into your little chat is the last thing I wish to do, may I suggest that we postpone this getting-to-know-each-other-more session? I really am in a hurry."

The giant's remark aroused Hwang's interest. In the limited time he had spent with Rock, the eastern warrior has witnessed enough to know that his westerner friend is not one who would waste time when faced with a pressing task.

"What's wrong, big guy? Is there anything we can do to help?"

Rock recounted Hwang his urgent mission to find Ivy and ask her to use her powerful Ivy Blade to cure the boy Bangoo of the strange illness that has inflicted him. Hearing his friend's great need, the Korean war general decided to forego his own task of bringing Mina back home and instead help Rock find Ivy and get her weapon.

"You know Ivy is not the type who'd give in to your request just like that, no matter how important your need may be." Hwang warned

Rock.

"Tell me about it." The white westerner replied in agreement.  
"Actually, I intended to look for Taki first, since I heard her blade is somewhat similar in power to Ivy's. But I can't find her in her sanctuary, and I'm running out of options."

"Yeah, Taki would have been a lot easier to talk to." The Korean fighter agreed.

Upon hearing the name of the lady ninja who had been her constant tormentor, the young Mina suddenly burst out in resounding disgust.  
"Oh please! I'd rather go home than see that woman again."

"Why? Who is this Taki?" Huntress inquired with growing curiosity.

Seung Mina was about to blurt out a batch of expletives to express her repugnance for the Japanese warrior dame, but Hwang quickly interrupted her.

"Don't ask. Suffice it to say that she's the kind of combatant you wouldn't want to face in battle. And as you can see, my young friend here is quite fearful of her."

"I am not!!!" reacted the impulsive Mina. "You might be surprised, but I've learned a lot since the last time I faced her. I can flatten her anytime I want to."

"Good. Then you wouldn't mind in case we run into her again, right?" Hwang added as he humored the youthful lass.

"Hah! Lead the way. I'll show you all who's boss." Mina declared with such arrogance that made Hwang smile with amusement.

In most situations, the Korean general is usually abhorrent to the kind of immaturity consistently displayed by the girl he loves. Though this trait is certainly not one to entice him into marriage, sometimes he can use it to his advantage in manipulating Mina to get her to unwittingly let him have his way. Mina's father is aware of this particular power Hwang has over her, which is the reason why he is the elder Seung's first choice to be Mina's husband.

Azrael stood by, deciding to assume the role of observer once more. His attention was drawn to the Huntress, and he didn't like what he saw in her face when Hwang described Taki. Jean Paul Valley, despite his slight deficiency of mental balance, is compensated by his uncanny empathic capabilities. And right now, knowing the Huntress' penchant for proving her worth, he can feel her eagerness to meet Taki as easily as he can feel the rays of the sun drumming on his skin.

### 3. Part 2

Time, Love and Armageddon, Part 2

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Time, Love and Armageddon

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\*\*Part Two\*\*

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\*\*June 1, 1598\*\*

The creature is a sight to behold. Though the little critter can be found in nearly any part of the world, it's queer ways and somewhat amusing appearance when munching on those little acorn seeds never fail to fascinate Mitsurugi every time he chances on the diminutive animal. The samurai mercenary has often wondered about the cute little beast's name, and at times he would even think of coining his own word to describe it.

"Hmm, squirrel' sounds mighty appropriate." He mused, while gently stooping down to avoid alarming the animal as he offers it a generous amount of peanuts he pulled out from his travel pouch.

An hour later, the exhausted warrior rests his tired body against the sturdy trunk of a tree, with the little squirrel right beside him, munching on the last of his peanuts. Mitsurugi tried to take a nap, but the disturbing thoughts racing through his mind rendered his attempt at a restful slumber an exercise in futility.

The samurai mercenary never liked that female ninja, at least that's what he knows about his ill feeling towards Taki. He's not sure why, though. It has never been a common practice to the professional bounty hunter to take things personally whenever the aspect of combat is involved. But when it comes to Taki, all Mitsurugi can detect in himself is a strong sentiment of disgust.

But he's not particularly pleased at himself with this. Being raised by his adoptive clan as an honorable warrior with a strong code of ethics which includes a high regard for women, Mitsurugi has tried many times in the past to discern the exact cause of his displeasure towards Taki. It could be false pride: he has always considered himself the greatest swordsman in the world, and is hell-bent in maintaining this reputation for as long as he can. And he just can't allow some upstart female fighter to cast a shadow of doubt on his renown.

But could it really be that? Being a participant of the two quests for Soul Edge, Mitsurugi has encountered a handful of other combatants who, though it pains him to admit, have given him a good run for his money. Foremost is Li Long, the assassin from the Chinese mainland whom he considers as his greatest rival. Then there are the two Koreans, Hwang Sung-Kyung and Seung Mina; the white behemoth Rock whose fighting style he found totally unconventional and yet extremely effective; the evidently insane German knight Siegfried; the unassuming girl from Greece, Sophitia; long-staff fighter Kilik and his constant companion Xianghua; the alluring yet dangerous Ivy; the strange metallic menace known only as Yoshimitsu; that twisted monstrosity Voldo, who stands ever vigilant in defense of this treasure cove owned by the infamous merchant Vercci; and a host of some others.

Mitsurugi considers them all as highly competent warriors. But he

also sees them as mere fair game. He never took it personally when one or two of them got the better of him in some isolated situations; that is after all, the life of a warrior. You can't always be on top of the heap however hard you try.

But Taki is different, pondered the contemplating samurai. There's something really annoying about her. This thought has troubled Mitsurugi to no end, and he finally decided to be true to himself and settle this once and for all. His deep contemplation was complemented by the heavy fog that was starting to descend over the lush woodlands.

Then the warrior suddenly stood in attention. "Hey, what's the deal with this fog? It's high noon."

Sensing something out of place in the surroundings, the alerted Mitsurugi clutched the hard wooden handle of his katana in anticipation of the unknown. Just then, he heard the faint yet unmistakable sound of grass being squashed under the weight of heavy footsteps, coming closer to his location.

The mercenary didn't have to wait long before he saw the blurred silhouette of a band which appear to be men holding bizarrely disfigured articles that look like some kind of weapons.

"What's this, some stupid fools looking for a fight" thought the proud samurai. He drew his sword from its leather sheath just as the figures became much clearer as they emerged from the haziness caused by the fog.

Mitsurugi's preparedness instantly turned to awe when he had a good look at his adversaries. Each of them wears some kind of armor that appears to be so old, rusty particles fly off with each step they make. Their faces are ashen, pale as the discolored skin of a lifeless corpse. The only thing that gives evidence to some form of life that animates these seemingly living dead creatures is the dull, red glow emanating from their eyes, which grow brighter with every step they make towards the startled Mitsurugi. They were an extremely frightful sight, enough to shake even the fearless warrior down to his sandals.

Mitsurugi, though feeling a grip of apprehension, stood his ground and waited for the horde to make their move. They slowly marched around him in a circle that completely surrounded the mercenary, leaving him no path of escape.

"Uh-oh, looks like these zombies mean business." The battle-ready samurai thought, as he counted his enemies to be numbering at eleven.

Finally, the one behind him lunged without warning. His keen senses combining with his lightning reflexes, Mitsurugi made a quick 180 degree pivot to fend off his attacker's blade with the cold steel of his katana. The mercenary quickly struck back with a slashing move of his own, cutting a deep and wide gash across the creature's abdominal area. The zombie reeled back from the force of Mitsurugi's blow, but it remained standing and reassumed a battle stance.

"What the no blood? And how could he have survived that?" marveled the now alarmed Mitsurugi. All of the sudden, he realized the

situation has become gravely serious, which casts doubts on his chances of surviving this encounter.

Three by three, the walking corpses began to press their attack on the embattled Mitsurugi, as he used all his quickness and skill to deflect the lethal blows of the surprisingly heavy swords his opponents wielded. The warrior was able to knock down one of the zombies to eliminate his blind sight handicap. But this move eventually caused him to be pinned against a tree. Mitsurugi is again back to the predicament of being surrounded by enemies from all sides.

The sound of clashing metal reverberated throughout the woods, causing a disturbance that stirred the animals from their peaceful reverie. The assortment of birds suddenly launched from their nests while the other beasts took a second to determine the source of the commotion, then promptly and speedily went the opposite direction. Even the squirrel who previously fed directly from Mitsurugi's hands abandoned his generous benefactor in an instinctive flight for self-preservation.

Mitsurugi's condition is now that of the grim and hopeless. The relentless attack of the zombies is starting to wear him down, even though he's still unmindful of the numerous cuts his body had already sustained from the sharp blades of his aggressors.

"I'm not going to survive this" the exhausted combatant thought in fear.

But it's never Mitsurugi's nature to just give up however grim the tidings are that faces him. The iron-willed warrior mustered all his remaining strength; and bellowing a frantic roar, whirled his katana in all directions to knock his enemies' weapons off his path to create a gap in the flank. He then quickly dashed for the first opening made by his desperate maneuver, freeing himself from the clutches of his would-be murderers.

The embattled warrior sprinted like crazy to flee from his attackers, never looking back to check if they're in pursuit or not. It seemed like he was running forever until he chanced upon a cave in the bottom of a deep gorge. Mitsurugi wasted no time in using the cavern as concealment, crouching just within the entrance to make sure that the zombies weren't able to catch up to him.

Being certain that he was able to shake them off, the jelly-kneed mercenary then slumped down on the cold and rocky cavern floor before passing out from exhaustion and pain.

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His vision still blurry, the wounded warrior struggled to sit up as he came to. It took some time before Mitsurugi's eye sight regained its clarity, after which he tried to make out his surroundings in the dark cave.

Remembering what had just transpired a few hours ago, the mercenary reached for his katana holstered on his waist band, only to feel that his sword and his waist band are both missing. That's when the samurai realized that his solidly built body is naked save for his loose trousers. What's more, his wounds have been patched up.

Mitsurugi tried to look around in an effort to find an answer to his baffling state.

Not long after, he heard the sound of soft footsteps. Mitsurugi, his previous horrid experience still fresh in his mind, frantically attempted to stand up to prepare himself for another struggle. But instead of disfigured monsters, he was met with the sight of a gentle and charming woman carrying what seemed to be a bowl. Though he is not in any mood to relax, the mercenary welcomed the sweet smell of vegetable soup prepared by the woman. To hell with the zombies, he thought. Right now, he's being offered a commodity which at the moment is the most important thing in the world for him: food.

The strange woman stared intently at the warrior who was busy gulping down the tasty concoction. Normally, it would have made Mitsurugi's hair stand on end, since he's not pretty much accustomed to the company of women, much more to one who's staring at him. But first thing's first, he had to satisfy his growling hunger before attending to anything else.

Just as he placed the empty bowl down, Mitsurugi was startled when a familiar voice echoed from behind him. "Great. Just great. The world's most feared swordsman, right here in my own home. Who's our next visitor, Chie? Cervantes?"

He could never mistake that voice even if he hears it through a melee, but still Mitsurugi couldn't believe his ears. He was even more astonished when he turned around to face his other host.

"Li Long?" Mitsurugi muttered in disbelief. "But but your dead. I saw you die with my own eyes."

"I was dead, my friend." Li Long curtly answered. "But I came back to life, in a manner of speaking. Thanks to my wife here." The Chinese warrior further added, referring to his life-partner Chie.

In Mitsurugi's eyes, Li Long did appear like he came back from the grave. The once proud assassin who boasts of one of the most impressive physiques among the fighters he has encountered now looks frail and worn down. The Japanese warrior actually almost didn't recognize his sometimes ally and greatest rival, who had shaved his head to complete baldness, and grew a lush beard to complement the totally new appearance. The only thing that identifies Li Long now as the once mighty blade wielder is his distinctive deep-set eyes complemented by a uniquely-shaped, thick eyebrows.

It may seem like Li Long and Chie saved him from certain death, but by no means does Mitsurugi consider this a reprieve. He knows only too well the grudge held against him by his rival, and he wonders if he had just placed himself in an even worse situation than before. Mitsurugi was pondering on the possibilities of another tussle with Li Long when the latter spoke out with an evident tone of sarcasm.

"I was just wondering what could possibly be so bad that had brought you here in such a pathetic situation. The entire English armada, perhaps?"

Ignoring Li Long's scornful remark, Mitsurugi instead chose to satisfy his own curiosity. "Li Long, what happened to you? How could



you still be alive?"

"Disappointments do abound in this world, my friend." The Chinese replied, sustaining the sarcastic pitch in his voice. "Don't worry, Mitsurugi, no one lives forever. In time I will surely meet my creator. Unfortunately though, so will you."

Mitsurugi got tired of Li Long's crass remarks and opted to slap it on his face. "Just stop it, you stupid fool. We're not in the battlefield. And I'm not in the mood for such insolence."

"Are you suggesting a truce, Mitsurugi? You?" Li Long replied, not exactly relinquishing his snide way of talking.

"Look, Li Long" Mitsurugi interrupted with a low tone of voice. "I know I've done things which I'm not particularly proud of. But you're right, no one lives forever. A man has to realize that sometimes. And" the mercenary suddenly fell silent, as if hesitating to continue on his suddenly altruistic way of talking.

Li Long ultimately realized that the man he's facing now is not the same arrogant and blood-thirsty trouble-seeker he once encountered in the past. Putting a rest to his hostility, the Chinese warrior sat down in front of his Japanese counterpart and began talking in a calm manner.

"Alright, let's talk. What happened to you?"

Mitsurugi began talking, and recapped the encounter he had with a group of invincible walking corpses who, for some unknown reason, sought to murder him. After the Japanese warrior finished, Li Long paused for a while in deep thought, then raised his head up with a troubled facial expression.

"Those creatures are called soul hunters." the Chinese assassin began to explain. "Legend has it that they are free-floating malevolent spirits who possess the bodies of the dead in obedience to a higher power."

"This is the first time I've heard of such a thing." Remarked the mercenary.

"Anyway," Li Long continued "it's been rumored that these evil spirits are usually summoned by sorcerers for tasks which can be considered suicidal. And usually, a sorcerer's power is enough to call upon only one soul hunter."

"You don't say" Mitsurugi interrupted. "Sorry to discredit your little rumor, but I'm pretty sure I battled a lot more than just one. There were about eleven if I counted them correctly."

Li Long's jaw dropped in amazement. "Incredible! It would have to take a great deal of power to conjure up that many soul hunters."

"Exactly." The samurai agreed. "And in that light, there's only one thing that readily comes to mind."

"Soul Edge." Mitsurugi and Li Long blurted out at the same time.

The duo paused for a few seconds, contemplating on the immensity of the threat currently staring them in the face. Mitsurugi was the first to move, slightly startling Li Long when he suddenly slapped his head in vexation.

"Buddha help me." Quipped the overwrought samurai. "Does this mean it's going to be that bitch's show again?"

Li Long tried to conceal a smile when he heard Mitsurugi's outburst. He may not be the type who meddles with other people's personal concerns, let alone those of his rival blade warriors. But in the short time that he spent with his fellow Blade Hunters, he had grown aware of the budding rivalry between the only two Japanese fighters in the pack, Mitsurugi himself and the lady ninja Taki. Li Long has always considered her a very formidable combatant, who possesses awesome skills which are more than adequate for Taki to stand her ground against the best in the world. And this is something that Mitsurugi's egocentric attitude finds incredibly difficult to acknowledge.

The Chinese assassin thus understands the mercenary samurai's resounding disgust at the prospect they are facing. During the first quest, it was Taki's Mekki-maru sword that inflicted the lethal blow which ultimately vanquished the demonic plunderer Captain Cervantes. And given the present situation, it appears that the only way to destroy the source of the fiendish soul hunters is by enlisting the lady ninja's help once more.

"However bad a taste it leaves in your mouth, my friend, I think that we have no other recourse but to ask for Taki's help. After all, she is the expert in dealing with these things." Li Long remarked, clearly referring to Taki's foremost occupation as a demon hunter.

"I saw her." Mitsurugi curtly replied.

"What?" Li Long reacted.

"I saw her. She's with her friend again, that girl from Athens." The samurai repeated while resting his head against the cave wall and covering his eyes with his forearm. "Three guesses on what they're up to."

Li Long didn't answer, and instead turned a concerned look at his wife, Chie, who's clearly showing signs of mixed excitement and anxiety, but can't even utter a single word on account of her having lost the ability to speak at a very young age due to a debilitating illness.

The Japanese maiden Chie was born with a rare and unnamed disease on the throat that rendered her literally speechless when she was only six years old. Because of this, she was scorned and ridiculed by children of the same age, who thought of her as a freakish child of demon-possessed parents. Other than her own father, the formidable ninja known as Hachebei, the only person who stood up in her defense was her childhood friend and confidante, the young Taki, whose innate courage and strength of conviction manifested early in her life. Chie's face brightened while reminiscing her past misadventures with Taki, recalling with a smile how the future lady ninja almost maimed older and much bigger boys who made the mistake of taunting the mute

girl. And now, even though she can't voice it out, her heart is screaming with the enormous desire to see her closest friend once more.

"Taki, oh how I miss you" Chie shouted in her mind.

The mute woman then turned her attention once more to her loving husband, gesturing him to ask for some more information from the samurai mercenary.

"Mitsurugi, where exactly did you see her?" inquired the onetime assassin.

The Japanese warrior sat up and faced his Chinese host. "I think the place was only beyond the Roman frontiers. She was with Sophitia and a score of other strangers who" Mitsurugi suddenly hesitated, not wanting to have to tell his rival about how the Batman nearly bested him in a duel using only his bare hands.

"At any rate," the samurai continued. "According to them, Ivy believes that she's really the daughter of Cervantes, so"

"Who's Ivy?" Li Long interrupted.

"Oh yeah, right. You weren't there" Mitsurugi was reminded of Li Long's absence in the second quest for the Soul Edge, which explains why the Chinese warrior is not acquainted with the English femme fatale.

Mitsurugi continued his tale while Chie stood up to leave the two to their conference. Li Long's thick brows drew closer to each other as he listened to his sometimes adversary recount what he learned regarding Ivy's alleged journey to seek out the resurrection of the dreaded pirate. When the Japanese bounty hunter concluded his fantastic account, the Chinese warrior then hurled back a question which made his counterpart bow his head in apparent shame.

"So why aren't you with them?" Li Long curiously interrogated the mercenary.

"I I don't know how to say this" Mitsurugi stuttered. "When I saw how you well succumbed to that pirate, I realized how huge a mistake was that I committed in considering myself the best sword fighter in the world."

"Come again?" Li Long asked with evident puzzlement. "I don't believe I caught your drift."

"Look, Li Long." Mitsurugi shot back, firming his voice. "Because of this Soul Edge experience and after having faced you, Taki and the others, I have come to an acceptance of the fact that my skill still could use some honing if I wish to be legitimately recognized as the greatest swordsman in the planet. And alright, I admit, you gave me a good run for my money the last time we faced in combat." The mercenary humbly acknowledged.

"You got that right." Li Long thought as he kept his newly found amusement at the Japanese warrior to himself. But then, the brief moment of humor was quickly followed by a slight feeling of astonishment, as the former assassin wondered what could have

transformed the otherwise pompous Mitsurugi into this unobtrusive man sitting in front of him.

The expression on Li Long's face betrayed his thoughts, with Mitsurugi accurately deciphering the perplexed look in his Chinese adversary. Exhibiting a wry smile, the mercenary samurai decided to lay the former assassin's stupefaction to rest.

"Look, Li Long. Being at the brink of death can bring about change even to the most contumacious and toplofty man alive." Mitsurugi remarked, obviously referring to his recent brush with the frightful soul hunters. "So please stop looking at me like that. You're making me feel like an impostor or something."

Just then, the two grizzled combatants were interrupted when the unassuming Chie walked back into the chamber, tugging along an adorable toddler who doesn't seem to be any older than four years. The samurai looked at the boy with utter curiosity, then turned his gaze back to his host.

"Li Long, is he who I think he is?" Mitsurugi attentively inquired.

The proud Chinese beamed even more as he got up from his perch and strutted playfully towards the adoringly merry child, who extended his petite arms in eager anticipation.

"This, my friend, is the reason why I came back from the dead." Li Long declared to the amazed Mitsurugi. "Meet my one and only child, my son Li Dang".

Mitsurugi can't help but smile as he witnessed the soft side of his battle-hardened rival. He can feel the pure joy emanating from the being of the warrior, to which he was easily consumed as he stared at the boy mischievously pounding with closed fists on his father's face.

"See, Mitsurugi? My son obviously took after me. He's already displaying the mannerism of a true warrior."

Chie moaned in mock defiance to Li Long's remark. "Oops, sorry, my love. Of course Li Dang also has your lovely, lovely eyes." Apologized the gleeful father to his pretty wife.

Li Long then turned his attention back to Mitsurugi.

"I wasn't exactly dead yet after you guys left. But I was sure I was headed in that direction, with all of you gone and no one there to save me except for a few remaining shards of the shattered evil sword." Recounted the Chinese combatant.

"But then, I thought I saw an apparition of Chie, calling me to come home. I don't know exactly how it happened. But somehow the residual mystic energy of the destroyed blade sent me an image of her and our soon-to-be-born son, begging the gods to bring me back. I guess that Soul Edge isn't all that bad after all." Li Long added, completing his account of how he survived his encounter with near-death. "It was hard, but my love for Chie was far stronger than any kind of pain and suffering. It took me all of a full year, but I made it just the same."

"I I didn't realize" Mitsurugi interrupted Li Long. "I'm so sorry for having left you there." Shamefully apologized the samurai mercenary.

"No apologies, my friend, you didn't know. Who knows, maybe I was already dead." The former killer-for-hire shot back, dismissing his rival's feeling of guilt.

Li Long then handed Li Dang back to Chie, before gently gesturing her to leave. As he went back to Mitsurugi, his face suddenly became sullen, as if being consumed with guilt himself.

"And that's also the reason" the Chinese started talking again "why I just can't possibly involve myself anymore with this third quest for the evil blade."

"Li Long," Mitsurugi muttered "I didn't come here to seek your aid. I myself turned my back to Taki and Sophitia when they asked for my help." The mercenary shamefully admitted. "But I regret having done so. It's not usually my style to give myself in to fear."

Li Long sympathetically rested a hand on Mitsurugi's right shoulder.

"My friend. Fear is healthy, it makes you think and ultimately it can make you a more effective fighter. To tell you the truth, however great your skills maybe, I've always thought of you as foolhardy in the battlefield. You fight like you're some kind of immortal."

"Yeah." The samurai agreed. "I found that out the hard way."

"I can never tell you what you should do." The Chinese warrior continued. "You choose your own path. If you think it wiser to turn your back on this quest, then fine. I'm sure someday you'll realize the wisdom of your decision. In my case, this is the path I choose: the path of life and love in the company of my family. This is where I should be. Let the others who have less responsibilities save the world for us."

Suddenly, the two men lurched when they felt a steady tremor that shook the ground underneath them. At almost the same time, Chie came scampering in and frantically signaled the two to come out of the cave.

Emerging from the cavern opening, the two warriors witnessed a frightful sight that made their hair stand on ends. Visible from the horizon is an ominously bright pillar of blue and white light originating from the west. Mitsurugi and Li Long felt a sudden surge of terror when they recalled a similar event that took place right after vanquishing the demonic Cervantes during the first quest for the Soul Edge.

"The Evil Seed." Mitsurugi exclaimed. "It looks like the event Sophitia predicted is already coming down."

As they anxiously watched the sinister light show, Li Long came to an abrupt and dreadful realization that this new threat is not something he can just turn his back to.

"This is never going to end, is it?" the Chinese warrior sullenly muttered.

"No, unless we make it." Mitsurugi replied, with an implication that almost shattered the heart of the former assassin.

Turning to his erstwhile adversary, Li Long eyed Mitsurugi with a dreary look in his face. After a few moments, he finally came to the hardest decision he ever made in his life, as the Chinese warrior accepted this turn of events with a heavy heart.

"We do this for my family. Mitsurugi, swear on our fathers' graves that we will see this through."

"I do swear." Mitsurugi resolutely pledged.

Then came an appalling silence between the two adroit fighters, which was subsequently broken by a somber remark from the downhearted Li Long.

"Chie will definitely not like this."

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\*\*June 03, 1598\*\*

The day is graced with the splendor of the radiant sunlight showering the environment with its warming rays. It would have been a real scorcher if not for the cool and gentle breeze blowing steadily from the northwest, forming a fascinating and almost hypnotic ripple of undulating meadow plants covering the broad expanse of the eastern valley bordering the Pyreenes heights.

Beneath the cover of the tall grass lies a slumbering viper enjoying an afternoon of peaceful respite. Suddenly, the serpent's attention was caught by a sudden shift of the rythmic rustling being created by the waving fauna. The venomous creature then stretched its slithering body to move away from the apparent source of the aberration, which turned out to be the sound of five pairs of human legs laboring to make it through the thick grass bed. A voice coming from the traveling cortege echoed through the faint whistle of the blowing winds.

"You don't talk too much, do you?" Taki spoke out in trying to initiate a conversation between her and her companion, the hero known in his time as the dark and enigmatic Batman. When the latter didn't respond to her inquiry, the irritated Taki wasn't able to contain her exasperation.

"You know, mister, you really might appreciate using your tongue if you'd just give it a try." Quipped the frustrated lady ninja.

Not far behind them, Robin beheld Taki's vain attempt, which elicited an amused reaction from the Boy Wonder.

"Good luck, Taki. The president of the United States himself can't get much of a conversation from Bruce on a good day." Laughed the

formidable juvenile.

Overhearing his comment, the girl with a heavy shield holstered on her back interrupted Robin's musing.

"What's a president?" inquired the Hellenic sword fighter.

"Oh, nothing. Just a word we use to describe our ruler." Interrupted Bludhaven's protector, the vigilante known as Nightwing. He realized the young Robin made a slip by mentioning a term not known in this era, so he had to douse the subject with a quick rejoinder of his own.

"Oh, something like a king." Sophitia sighed.

"Yeah, exactly like a king well, sort of." The Boy Wonder tentatively concurred.

Finding the topic somewhat drab, the Greek dame decided to change the subject with a question she's been wanting to ask Nightwing from the moment they met.

"So, uhh Nightwing, right? Forgive me for being a bit intrusive, but I did notice a semblance of attraction you have for my friend."

The original Boy Wonder didn't answer, and instead simply flashed a smile that adequately satisfied Sophitia's query. Nightwing then followed it with an inquiry of his own.

"Why? Is that a problem?"

"No. No, of course not." Sophitia quickly retorted to erase whatever wrong impressions Nightwing may have. "Actually, to tell you the truth I am kind of hoping you would do something about it."

The Athenian's last remark caused Tim Drake's right eye brow to elevate as he was evidently intrigued by the idea. However, he turned his thought around almost at the same time when he was reminded of their other missing companions. Landing a solid elbow nudge on Nightwing's side, the current Boy Wonder whispered a remark that almost made Richard Grayson laugh.

"Hey, Dick, I thought you were going out with Helena."

"It didn't work." Nightwing curtly replied, pertaining to his failed attempt at a relationship with the Huntress. "Besides, you should be glad. I've always known about the huge crush you have for her." the guardian of Bludhaven teasingly added.

"Stop it, you jerk. Batman might hear." The Dark Knight's partner nervously shot back.

Tim Drake didn't react that way without good reason. He knows only too well of the resounding repugnance the Batman harbors towards the Huntress, who gained the unofficial label of the Anastasia of Gotham from her fearless but less than abstemious method of dealing with the city's criminal elements. And even though the adamant Caped Crusader himself nominated the Huntress for JLA membership, he still firmly intends to insulate his other charges from the obstinate daughter of a murdered mobster. Especially Robin, whose close association with

the Huntress never really escaped the Batman's awareness, contrary to what the Boy Wonder actually believes.

And the last thing that he needs right now is his mentor discovering the fact that he does have a heavy crush on the Huntress. He definitely wouldn't want to see Batman going totally ballistic.

The young crimefighter's attention was drawn anew to his big brother figure when the latter began speaking again to the comely looking Greek warrior damsel.

"So what's the deal with your friend?" Nightwing asked Sophitia.

"What do you mean?" the Hellenic lass asked back.

"Well When I tried to talk to her before, she seemed kind of aloof. Is she afraid of me or something?"

"No, not at all." Sophitia quipped. "It's just that well it's sort of a long story. Suffice it to say that something happened in her past that rendered her unable to socialize with men."

"She was married?" Nightwing asked again with a rapidly growing interest with the lady ninja's background.

"No, of course not. Nothing of that sort." Sophitia replied. "It's pretty hard to explain, actually. And I'm afraid I'm really not at liberty to tell you anything. Sorry."

"Oh, okay." The vigilante muttered with a feeling of disappointment, as he sensed Sophitia's intent of giving a rest to the subject.

"I'd be truly delighted, though, if you'd be able to somehow pierce through her barrier." The Athenian suddenly blurted out.

"Excuse me?" Nightwing reacted with a renewed sense of hope.

"Taki's been too much of a loner for the most part of her life. And as her friend, I just can't tolerate that situation for long. I want her to be happy, but I don't know how to convince her to change her grim outlook towards men and love.

"Perhaps you're just what the doctor ordered for my stubborn friend. To tell you the truth, it's the first time I saw her react that way when you approached her. Maybe there's still hope for Taki after all." Sophitia revealed to the elated Nightwing.

"But don't tell her I told you that." The Hellenic fighter quickly added. "She's gonna kill me if she learns that I've placed you on the right path."

"No problem." Nightwing assured Sophitia, while turning his admiring gaze to the headstrong Japanese female warrior, who at that moment stooped down to examine a set of queer footprints she spotted on the reddish brown soil.

"This is most strange." Taki remarked in wonderment. "I know of no animal in this side of the world that bears this shape in its foot. I wonder what could have made these."



The lady ninja didn't notice the Dark Knight kneeling almost beside her, taking his turn at scrutinizing the weird imprints on the ground.

"This is not made by animals." Batman declared. "Judging from the uneven depths of the footprints, it's made by some kind of two-legged creature with appendages of different lengths. I could dismiss it as an injured or even disabled person wearing a pair of three-toed boots. But these are not made by only one creature. There are at least twenty-two sets of footprints. And all of them bear the same pattern of irregularity."

Rising from her genuflected position, Taki feigned an astounded tone of voice to express her annoyance to her previously silent companion.

"Amazing! It talks!"

True to his form, the Batman ignored Taki's sarcastic remark and instead concentrated on the direction where the footprints lead.

"These prints may not be that significant, but I want to be sure. Taki, let's follow it." Ordered the Dark Knight, while signaling their three associates to follow them.

While tracing the trail of unusual footmarks, Taki renewed her intention of conversing with Batman.

"What's with you? Cat got your tongue or something?"

"What do you want to know?" the Dark Knight suddenly exclaimed, which slightly startled the lady ninja. However, the intrepid girl refused to let herself be intimidated by her otherwise cowering associate, and so quickly tried to regain her composure.

"Why do they call you Batman'?" questioned the lady ninja, partly to hide the fact that she's a bit cowed by his imposing presence, and also partly because she really wants to know the reason behind the name.

"Because I am blind to things in the light and all-seeing to those hiding in the darkness." Was the Caped Crusader's brief and ambiguous response, which gave Taki more confusion than clarification.

Contemplating on a different approach, the lady ninja was instead taken by surprise when the Dark Knight turned to her with his own curious comment.

"You wanted to ask something about Nightwing." Batman stated matter-of-factly.

Though not wanting to admit this seeming evidence of weakness of character as Taki considers it, she realized just the same the futility of trying to deny her concealed sentiment to the man whom she felt knows a lot more than what he's supposed to.

"So what if I do?" the Underground Hunter boldly shot back at the

Dark Knight.

"Whatever you're thinking about or feeling, forget about it." Batman exclaimed with utter frankness. "He is not the right man for you."

"Really?" Taki mockingly retorted. "Who are you supposed to be, his father? Anyway, you don't have to tell me that because I don't plan on doing anything along the line of what you may be thinking."

"Good." Batman quipped. "It would do you good to maintain your normal attitude towards Nightwing."

No longer able to contain her exasperation for the crimefighter's presumptuous way of talking, the lady ninja finally cut loose and lashed on the Batman.

"And who do you think you are, talking about my normal attitude as if you've known me all my life?" Taki questioned angrily. "You've been acting like you know everything there is to know about the people around you. You don't even have the slightest idea what I've been through."

"No, I don't." Batman concurred. "But whatever it is, I sympathize for your loss."

Taki became even more puzzled at Batman's last remark. "What made you think I suffered a loss?"

Batman didn't answer. However, his previous comment had already stirred up a storm inside the lady ninja's psyche, causing her to fall back to a reflective state with the memory of her aunt's tragic demise coming back to her like a haunting spectre, refusing to allow herself to let go of the pains of the past. Her tormenting recollection was interrupted when the Caped Crusader spoke once more.

"I know. It's painful."

Batman paused for a moment and thought about Superman. He then continued despite the gnawing melancholy.

"But that's what life is all about, dealing with pain. You either succumb to it if you're weak; or you can accept it, choke down the hurt, then move on."

"Pain? Pain?!?" Taki snarled in resounding ire, finally unleashing pent-up emotions that she had imprisoned inside her heart for so long. "What the hell do you know about pain? You don't even know what it's like to witness with your very own eyes the death of someone you love with all your heart!"

At this point, the Dark Knight stopped walking and trained his full attention at the seething lady ninja. He stared at her hard with his unblinking eyes that seemed to penetrate right into the nexus of her soul. Taki felt her fury being immersed in frigid waters, unable to sustain its rage as it was subjected under the dampening effect of the Batman's ice-cold gaze that sent a shivering chill into her body and soul. The lady ninja's knees almost buckled when Batman finally

stopped staring at her and continued on his way.

The two were oblivious to the fact that their little clash didn't escape the notice of their three companions walking right behind them. Though a bit stunned by this incident, Nightwing collected himself and walked towards the trembling Taki, knowing all too well the kind of disturbing ordeal she just went through.

"Don't worry about it." Nightwing consoled Taki. "There's only one person I know who never got the terror treatment from Batman. And he's not from this planet."

"I never thought it possible." The lady ninja mumbled softly. "I just got terrified of a man."

Nightwing just smiled as he sustained his amicable demeanor to put some levity in the otherwise tense situation.

"Hey, it could be worse. You just might fall in love with one."

Taki's reaction to Nightwing's remark was that of unqualified restlessness, as she threw an irritable side-glance at the handsome vigilante before walking out on him. This new kind of emotion is causing a great upheaval in her heart; a feeling that is now causing Taki much distress out of the immensely frightful possibility that she just might already be falling for Nightwing.

"I'm sorry, aunt Deki, " the Japanese warrior whispered. "I have failed you, and I am about to destroy myself in the process."

Taki's melancholic mood was interrupted by the echoing voice of her friend and comrade-in-arms.

"Hey, don't you think it's become awfully cold all of the sudden?" Sophitia exclaimed as she noted the sudden drop of temperature in this otherwise warm day. It was then that they all noticed the formation a fog bank rapidly approaching their position.

"Hey, Sophie, you got yourselves some really rad weather in this place." Robin blurted out, to which the Hellenic damsel retorted with a tone of dread in her voice when she felt an unusually high level of mystic energy emanating from the freakish weather phenomenon.

"No, Robin. This doesn't have anything to do with the weather. We're about to have some very unpleasant company." Sophitia warned the Boy Wonder.

And as if in accord to her fears, the otherworldly mist opened up in the middle to reveal a battalion of misshapen creatures not unlike the ones encountered by the Japanese mercenary Mitsurugi. Seeing the frightful horde, the suddenly embattled Sophitia pulled her Omega sword and Elk shield out from their bridle and assumed battle position.

"Taki, they're soul hunters." Surmised the alarmed Athenian.

"And damn too many of them, too. How could this be possible?" Taki snapped back after drawing both her Rekki-maru and Mekki-maru blades from their harness.

"Beats the hell out of me, my friend. But this shouldn't be too much of a problem between your Mekki-maru and my Omega sword." The steadfast Sophitia replied, knowing full well that these horde of walking corpses do not stand a chance against the powers of their preternatural weapons.

Confident that they could easily overcome this threat, the two warrior women told Batman, Robin and Nightwing to stand back.

"This shouldn't take too long." The self-assured Taki added.

"Hey, Bruce, don't you think we should help them?" Robin whispered to Batman while clutching a makeshift rod he fashioned from a dead branch.

"No." was the Dark Knight's authoritative reply. "We do as they tell us. It looks like they have the situation under control"

Then suddenly, a deafening explosion boomed from the fog, accompanied by a blinding flash of lightning that struck the blades of the two courageous women. Feeling a surge of pain along their arms, both Sophitia and Taki had no recourse but to let go of their weapons, which still crackled with electricity after it fell on the ground. The adroit Athenian attempted to retake her weapon, only to be stunned again when she was electrocuted by the crackling lightning field enveloping the Omega sword.

"No! We can't use our weapons!" the terrified Sophitia screamed.

And as if taking a cue from the lightning, the demonic squadron finally launched in a full scale attack against the five embattled warriors. Vastly outnumbered, the Batman and his wards nevertheless gave their best efforts to try and rescue the two women who seemed to be the main targets of the soul hunters.

Though disarmed, Taki and Sophitia still joined the melee. The five gallant fighters fought hard to stand their ground for as long as they can. However, they were soon overcome by the enemies' sheer weight of number. In desperately trying to find a refuge, the quintet was soon trapped by the horde against the hard walls of a granite cliff.

Pressed on one side by vile undead murderers and on the other by a wall of solid rock, Batman, Taki, Robin, Sophitia and Nightwing braced themselves for one final stand. But to their surprise, the demonic throng ceased its attack and just stood there, surrounding them. After a few moments, the horde parted to reveal the alluring figure of a scantily clad woman holding a weapon that appears to be a bullwhip with large, sharp blades affixed along its length. Taki and Sophitia lurched upon recognizing the figure who apparently leads the devilish soul hunters.

"Ivy!" the two women muttered in unison.

"My, my. What warm enthusiasm the two of you exhibit. I apologize for the hellish welcome, but these monstrosities are the only things I can manage in such short notice." The platinum-haired woman snidely snapped back at the pair. "And who are your friends? Would you care introducing me to such magnificent males?" Ivy furthered, turning her

attention to the three crimefighters from the future.

Ignoring Ivy's humoring, Sophitia talked to her in an attempt to get her to reconsider her actions.

"Ivy, what you plan to do is dangerous and foolish. You can't possibly think of bringing Cervantes back to life. Millions of innocents will be endangered if you do."

"I'm so sorry, my sweet Sophitia." The seductive femme fatale retorted. "I guess I'm just an insufferable papa's girl. And with the possibility that Cervantes is my real father, well I just can't bear to let him rot under the waters where you left him, can I?"

Taki held Sophitia by the arm, as if telling her not to waste her energy in trying to reason with the deranged woman.

"Then I guess it's safe to say that everyone's doomed, huh. Ivy, you wretch! You are so mistaken if you think I'd simply allow you to do this." The furious lady ninja growled at her onetime comrade-in-arms.

"Why Taki, such angst. Such display of negative emotions. If you intend to act that way for the rest of your life, then I reckon you'd be better off dead. Hmmm come to think of it, I think you'd all be better off dead. Saves me the trouble of dealing with meddlers in my grand labor of love." the twisted Ivy exclaimed before turning back to her army of soul hunters.

"My hideous pawns, you may now finish your job." The Englishwoman commanded the ghastly soul hunters before departing the scene.

"Batman, what do we do? Nothing we've done so far can hurt these uglies." A worried Robin whispered to the Dark Knight.

"Go for the head." Batman quietly replied. "While fighting them, I noticed that these creatures seem to put an extra effort in protecting their heads. That could be their weak spot."

"Easier said than done." Nightwing likewise whispered.

"I know, but we've got to try." Batman quipped. "If not, we're all dead."

The Dark Knight of Gotham was just about to make his move when he noticed a faint swishing sound coming from the back of the soul hunters. Out of nowhere, a huge ax thundered towards them and squarely hit the head of one of the living corpses, snapping it off its neck and crushing it against the granite wall like some kind of oversized, dry tomato.

From a short distance, the quintet then heard a menacing battle cry that, Sophitia thought, could come from only one person.

"That's Rock! Taki, that's Rock!" Sophitia cried out like an excited child while clutching hard on her friend's forearm.

The Greek damsel wasn't mistaken, as the huge American warrior came charging out from the fog, quickly followed by the Korean duo of

Hwang Sung-Kyung and Seung Mina, the Huntress and Azrael. In an instant, the tide of battle turned in favor of the heroes, as the embattled soul hunters were overcome with confusion when they were flanked by foes attacking from all sides.

"Helena!!!" Robin shouted when she recognized the Huntress.

"All right, let's rock!" Nightwing yelled while pummeling two soul hunters with a devastating reverse round house.

Batman didn't waste any time as he hoisted a huge chunk of granite and used all his strength to pound it against the head of a soul hunter right in front of him. The Dark Knight allowed himself a grin of satisfaction when the demonic creature fell limp on the ground after its head was severed from its body.

"Everyone! Go for the head!" the Caped Crusader bellowed to instruct his comrades.

Throughout the commotion, the furious Underground Hunter decided to go after the deranged Englishwoman. Executing a series of lightning fast somersaults, Taki quickly grabbed her weapons and immediately launched to hunt for her prey.

"Ivy, you're mine!"

The thrill of combat is what she lives for. Moving with a sudden burst of speed, the youthful Seung Mina planted the blunt end of her Zanbatoh spear to the ground as she pushed hard with her legs, launching herself into the air like a world-class pole vaulter. Still clutching her weapon tight, the formidable fighter from Korea landed in the middle of three soul hunters, and immediately swung her long blade around, switching her hold from her right hand to her left in a dazzling display of awesome skill. Mina then crouched low to the ground for a second to watch her enemies fall to the ground, rendered headless by her spectacular attack.

Picking herself up, Mina looked around to check for other soul hunters she can get her hands on. Her eyes caught the sight of the younger Robin, who at that time was also showing off, whirling his improvised rod between his two hands to smash the heads of two more demonic creatures. Her heart almost leaped from her chest when she nearly mistook the Boy Wonder for someone she knew who possesses a similar fighting style.

"Kilik" the young warrior exclaimed in her mind. The sight of the fighting Robin reminded her of that young man she met during the second quest for the evil blade: Kilik, the greatest living practitioner of the Ling Sheng Su style rod fighting. Being unique in the sense that he's the first man to introduce her to the essence of romance, Kilik was also the first to have broken Seung Mina's heart when he once implied to her his feelings for his partner, the Chinese lass Xianghua, likewise an authority in the Ling Sheng Su style sword technique.

"MINA! BEHIND YOU!" Her gloomy reverie was suddenly interrupted by Hwang, frantically hollering from a distance to warn her of an enemy standing right behind her, who was about to deliver a lethal blow with its crooked weapon. But before Seung Mina knew anything, she felt a shock wave jolt her nape when the soul hunter who was about to

murder her was hit hard by Azrael's fist, which sent the zombie's head flying off.

When she realized what happened, the younger Seung stared in amazement at the Angel of Vengeance, totally impressed by the power of his blow.

"You did that only with your hands?"

Azrael looked at Mina with slightly concerned eyes, as he just realized he made a mistake by displaying his above-human level strength that was given to him by the hideous programming of the despicable Order of St. Dumas. How can he explain to these medieval warriors the awesome might he wields despite having a not-so-impressive physique?

"Well, uh I have extremely strong bones. My mother used to drink lots of goat milk when she was pregnant of me." The Agent of the Bat wittily remarked.

"Oh" Mina sighed, nodding her head in agreement despite not really knowing what her savior was talking about.

"We've got them on the run, team! Let's finish this." Batman told the trio of Sophitia, Nightwing and Rock, who each had just vanquished some of the last standing soul hunters. And in a few minutes, not a single zombie was left standing, leaving the heroes exhausted but relieved for having survived the battle.

Like a good military commander, the Dark Knight checked to see if anyone of his charges was injured during the skirmish. That's when he noticed that one of them is missing.

"Where's Taki?" the Caped Crusader asked Sophitia.

"I I don't know. She was standing right beside me before Rock and the others arrived." Replied the worried Athenian fighter.

"I thought I saw her go after that Ivy babe." Robin interrupted, before pointing his right arm eastward. "I think she went that"

Nightwing was already moving before the Boy Wonder could complete his sentence. Sophitia followed suit, running after the protector of Bludhaven to find out what became of the lady ninja.

Meanwhile, Taki recoiled after dodging a near-hit by Ivy's blade-studded bullwhip. She was about to reassume her battle stance when she felt a sudden attack of lightheadedness accompanied by an alarming sensation of warmth in her face. The lady ninja was terrified to feel blood gushing from the side of her torso. Pressing her left hand on the wound tight to minimize the blood loss, the Japanese warrior maiden looked at her smirking adversary through her already fuliginous vision.

There is no doubt in Taki's mind that Ivy's prowess has somehow been augmented. Though she's always found the long reach of the English dame's snake sword an inconvenience, it never really posed a serious threat to the immensely talented ninja. Taki never had a problem in overcoming Ivy in the few events that they faced each other in combat

during the last of the two quests for Soul Edge.

But that was then. And that is definitely not the case now. Taki would have considered the platinum-haired warrior to have undergone some rigorous training to enable her to match the lady ninja's awesome skills. But no amount of training can teach a fighter to make herself partially incorporeal; it was like striking on thin air whenever Taki tried to attack Ivy. But the English lady's weapon is as solid as anything could ever be, and it has already inflicted not a few wounds on the Japanese combatant's supple body, the latest and most serious being this gaping laceration which is now about to rob Taki of her consciousness.

"Nuh nice trick uhh" Taki muttered with much difficulty, referring to Ivy's ability to shift into a ghostly form. "Can you do it while standing on your head, too?" the embattled lady ninja sarcastically added in defiance of her enemy.

"Oh, you jest." Ivy shot back. "It's either you've had a personality make-over or you're just delirious. But I'm not too anxious to find out." The British femme fatale further exclaimed while her bullwhip pulls itself back to reassume the form of a sword.

Casually prancing towards the injured ninja, Ivy lifted her blade over her head and prepared to deliver the death blow. But at the last moment, Taki was able to muster the feeble strength she had left, putting Rekki-maru in between her and the Ivy blade to deflect the baneful Ivy's assault. Her desperate defensive move bought the lady ninja a few more moments of tortured existence, though the force of the blow knocked the short sword off her weakened grip.

"Wow, still got some fight left in that luscious body of yours." Ivy mockingly remarked. "My dear Taki, give it up. I promise that you won't feel any pain."

"N not in your lifetime..." The heavily-breathing lady ninja laboriously snapped back, trying her damndest best to pull herself up on her feet.

"Have it your way, then." Ivy replied with finality, as she lashed her sword in the air to turn it anew into a bladed whip, intending to use it to strangle Taki to death. But before she could carry out her wicked intent, the white-haired aggressor heard a series of rapid footsteps fast approaching. Turning her gaze towards the direction of the disturbance, Ivy saw Nightwing and Sophitia coming to Taki's aid.

Though she wanted desperately to kill the two warriors, the Englishwoman decided on the side of prudence, as she is not certain if her phasing powers can enable her to take on more than one opponent at once. Whispering a short litany, Ivy stepped back into a warp conjured up by her magical adjuration and left the bleeding yet alive Taki to be found by her friends. \*\*\*\*

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\*\*June 04, 1598\*\*

It's already way past midnight and only within a clock cycle before the sun rises to begin a new day. As he looks around the camp,



Nightwing sees most of his companions in this suddenly enlarged detachment taking a very much needed time to sleep. He subsequently ignored them, and focused his attention back to the peacefully slumbering yet badly-injured lady ninja lying down in front of him.

After their group was nearly executed the day before by a horde of zombies and then reinforced by the arrival of the Huntress and Azrael together with some more 16th century warriors, they found the severely wounded body of the unconscious Taki in a secluded woodlands near the battlefield. Richard Grayson remembered that moment as one of the most terrible in his life. Almost as horrid as that day more than a decade ago, when he witnessed the flailing bodies of the two elder members of the trapeze act team the Flying Graysons, helplessly plunging to their deaths in an "accident" that was really the doing of one devious criminal Tony Zucco.

To his utter relief, they arrived at the scene just before the evil maiden Ivy was able to murder Taki. However, the lady ninja wasn't out of the woods yet. Her injuries were somewhat on the critical side, such that even all the rudimentary knowledge in the field of medicine and anatomy of his mentor, the dark and enigmatic Batman, cannot offer a solid assurance of survival for the poor Japanese fighter. Thus, at this very moment, even though she appears so serene in her slumber, Taki is in fact still fighting for her life. It would be a good sign for the lady ninja if she can make it through the night, the Dark Knight surmised earlier.

And Nightwing wants to be the first to be there when Taki finally opens her eyes. He wants to make sure that whatever happens, he's right there by her side to attend to her needs and respond to any emergencies that might arise. Though he is aware of the special regard he has for the elusive woman, Nightwing had absolutely no idea how deep it's grown in the few days that they were together. Maybe he'd never have known if not for that grisly moment when he beheld the profusely bleeding lady ninja, struggling with her labored breathing and faint pulse. At that moment, Nightwing realized just how much he cared for Taki. He tenderly and lovingly caressed the soft hair of the lady ninja before resting his back against the trunk of a sturdy tree that was providing shelter for himself and the injured warrior.

Watching from a short distance, the striking figure of the Batman stands ever vigilant; a dark and fear-inspiring sentinel tirelessly keeping guard around the perimeters of their provisional camp. His senses always keen and concentration rigid as the Rock of Gibraltar, the mysterious Dark Knight's attention is focused over everything that's happening within and beyond the confines of their temporary encampment. And that last gesture of affection by Nightwing didn't escape the ever watchful eyes of the adamant Caped Crusader.

"It's your call, Dick. I'm not your father. And don't ever say that I didn't warn you." The Dark Knight thought, silently expressing concern over Nightwing's perilous personal involvement with the lady ninja.

All the while, the equally worried Sophitia likewise can't bring herself to sleep, overcome by anxiety while her attention is fixated on her impaired friend. Her brooding mood was interrupted when she heard a rustling sound from behind her. She turned her head to find

the colossal Rock crouching to find a comfortable position beside her.

"Hi, Sophie." The behemoth softly echoed a greeting.

"Hey." Sophitia curtly returned Rock's salutation, accompanied by a gentle and disarming smile on her face.

Sophitia inched sideways to provide some room for Rock. Sitting side by side, the two Blade hunters formed a somewhat comical sight of a beautiful and fragile girl who looks like a proverbial Jane sitting beside an oversized Tarzan. The two just sat there, unmoving and speaking nothing as they both watched from a distance the wounded Taki being attended to by the distressed Nightwing. Then Rock broke the silence with a question that had been forthcoming since after they defeated the soul hunters.

"So, what do you make of these strangers?"

"Oh, you mean Batman and the others?" Sophitia replied. "I honestly think that they're good people, though a bit on the mysterious side. Especially Batman himself."

"I'll say." Rock commented. "There's something strange about that guy. He doesn't seem evil, but I sense something in him that kind of scares me a little."

"Tell me about it. You should have seen Taki when they had an argument yesterday. I've never seen the girl tremble like that." Sophitia added in recollection of the event that happened during the previous day.

"Taki? Scared of a man? Hah! Next thing we know we'll be watching Voldo distributing Vercci's treasures among the poor." The behemoth laughed, amused by the irony of his idea.

Training his gaze back to Taki, Rock can't help but take notice of Nightwing's unusual display of concern over the Japanese warrior.

"Now that is a sight to behold. Does this guy have any idea what he's getting himself into?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about it." Sophitia replied smiling.

"Better check that train of thought of yours, Sophie. Taki has half the mind to cripple this man if he so much as offer her a wildflower." Rock snapped back at the Athenian.

"I don't know, Rock, my friend. If my plan works -- which I hope it does -- we just might witness our mighty ninja friend eating her words and her sword's harness." The Greek girl replied teasingly. However, her last remark just reminded the American warrior of his primary objective for this journey.

"Man, I hope I wouldn't have to fight Taki just to get her to loan her sword to me." The somber-faced Rock remarked.

"Oh, Rock, of course it wouldn't come to that. Taki is a good person.

It may not always show because of her seriousness and ferocity in battle. But I'm pretty sure she also wouldn't want anything bad to happen to Bangoo." The compassionate Athenian replied in reassuring the American warrior.

Rock didn't utter a word of response, and instead just heaved a deep breath to try and clear out the heaviness in his heart caused by the troublesome thought of his ward's pitiful state. Above them, the first signs of the approaching morn makes itself evident, basking the cottony clouds with bright crimson and orange rays coming from the eastern horizon.

#### 4. Part 3

Time, Love and Armageddon, Part 3

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Time, Love and Armageddon

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\*\*Part Three\*\*

\*\*Vanishing Point, time point nowhere\*\*

It feels like it's been ages since he last tasted the sensation of movement in the stiff and sore muscles of his chonal-energy infused body, and the Waverider, the mightiest member of the self-styled protectors of the time stream who call themselves the Linear Men, doesn't feel all that mighty given his present situation.

For the last five hours measured in earth-time, the energy being who was once 21st century's most brilliant physicist, Matthew Ryder, had been contemplating on what his mortal enemy, the baneful and malicious Extant, could possibly get from destroying the world. There's always the angle of revenge against the heroes who fought him during the time stream rocking incident called Zero Hour; the same heroes who are now languishing in despair for living with the knowledge that all of their god-like powers were not enough to save Earth from total devastation.

But the time guardian immediately dismissed the idea, acknowledging that the amplitude of Extant's evil psyche way transcends the paltriness of simple revenge. Though the nefarious villain used to be a mere two-bit crimefighter known as Hawk of the brother tandem of Hawk and Dove, his mind still has the ability to think big; a penchant that he displayed when he was able to pull the entire world under the palm of his hands as the world tyrant Monarch, in a reality that was erased from existence when Matt Ryder participated in a forbidden experiment to transport himself back in time.

Then suddenly, as if his mind's eyes were opened to a chilling realization, Waverider blurted out a conclusion that would have frozen his blood if he had any.

"My God he wanted to be Monarch again!"

His grim contemplation was interrupted by a voice which, upon

recognition, beckoned a sigh of immense relief from the embattled time guardian.

"You're a tad too late, Waverider. Extant is already Monarch." The voice echoed through the resonator connecting the void chamber containing his prison cube to the observation deck just beyond the airless room.

"Liri? Liri Lee? Is that you?" Waverider exclaimed.

"Well, I'm definitely not Monica Lewinsky if that would make you feel better." His fellow Linear Man retorted.

A few moments later, the two time protectors faced themselves somberly while exchanging notes about the recently transpired events. It turned out that a few months after the meteor disaster, Extant set in motion a second part of his plan, using vast resources no one thought he had in pretending to be Earth's hero as he led a massive effort together with the remaining metahumans to rebuild the planet and erase the aftermath of the cosmic cataclysm that befell it. And due to his efforts, the vile criminal who at the moment reverted to his Hawk persona was exalted by the grateful population, rendering it as child's play for the scheming knave to declare himself anew as the world's savior and, a little later on, its overseer.

"Oh man, that's the oldest trick in the self-help, conquer-the-world-while-pretending-to-be-its-savior handbook. I wonder how he got the heroes to fall for it." Waverider marveled.

"Think about it." Liri Lee began to explain. "With Superman, Wonder Woman, Martian Manhunter and all the major players and core Justice Leaguers dead, the remaining metas became easily demoralized. Hawk I mean Extant, knew this would happen. He knows that no one will be there who's got the brains to question his motives or the bizarre timeliness of his actions. He's got it made."

"And I took away the only remaining hero who has any chance of standing up against him and shutting him down." The exasperated Waverider realized, clutching his forehead hard with his hands in disgust. "We should bring Batman back."

"And then what?" Liri shot back. "Other than his teammates in the JLA, the majority of the metahuman population really don't trust him at all. They're more scared of him than anything else." The sole female Linear Man added. "Batman is a very capable individual. I know he has the ability to defeat Monarch in his game. But in this situation, Monarch will not be acting alone. The others are so bought up by his play-acting that they're ready to do anything he tells them to. Besides, if the solution to this crisis is to bring the Batman back, who's got the power to travel through time unaided other than the Linear Men?"

"The Flash, Wally West he can do it." The Waverider quipped.

"Sorry, Rider." Liri answered with a foreboding look in his face. "Monarch was prepared for that. One of the first things he did after gaining control was murder Wally West. He was unjustly tried for high treason and killed in a public execution together with Gabriel Walker and that android Hourman from the 853rd century."

"Then that settles it. I'm going!" the dumbfounded Linear Man decided. And before Liri Lee could stop her impetuous colleague, Waverider was already gone, sliding forth with impossible ease into the otherwise impregnable wall of the chronal current.

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June 10, 1598

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"This place is beginning to look familiar." The stalwart Korean warrior Hwang Sung-Kyung echoed. "We're nearing the Spanish pirate port of Captain Cervantes. I suggest we stop here for awhile and rest. We're going to need all our strength for tomorrow."

As the convoy composed of five of the most formidable crimefighters of the 20th century and likewise five of the greatest warriors of the medieval ages gather to a stop near the opening of a shallow cave, the still recovering lady ninja Taki stares blankly into the wilderness, unmindful of the dimming sky and dropping temperature that is beckoning the arrival of another twilight.

A stone's throw away, the Korean lass Seung Mina thoughtfully gawks at her erstwhile tormentor. Before they met each other again a few days ago when Mina's group rescued Taki's from the soul hunter army, the youthful female fighter half-expected that a duel with the Japanese maiden will be inevitable, since she swore to herself to never let the lady ninja get away again with insulting her.

But during the last few days while they traversed the majestic grandeur of the Pyrenees mountain ranges separating France from the Iberian peninsula, the Korean warrior girl was quite surprised by the totally strange demeanor displayed by the ninja. To Mina's assessment, Taki seemed too quiet and meek, a far cry from the proud and domineering Taki she knew last they encountered each other during the second quest. She easily dismissed the lady ninja's change of attitude as a side-effect of her near-fatal injury at first. But right now, Mina thought, the queerness being displayed by Taki is way too much to be considered recuperating ills.

Seung Mina was still deep in thought that she didn't notice the object of her fascination walk by her while clutching a bundle of firewood. The voice of the lady ninja then startled her out of her spell.

"Hey, Mina. How's Master Han-Myong doing?" Taki greeted the totally flabbergasted Korean.

"What's this," Mina thought, "Taki cordially asking about my father? It's almost as bizarre as Voldo distributing Vercci's treasures among the poor." The youthful warrior mulled.

A polite Taki indeed way exceeds the pessimistic expectation Mina had, and right now she just can't get over the scenario unfolding right before her very eyes. Not that she's complaining, of course. Seung Mina likes this Taki far better than the one she knew a couple

of years ago. But she still wouldn't be caught dead admitting it to anybody.

Quietly going about her chore, the lady ninja is nevertheless aware of another pair of eyes fixated on her at that very moment. And she's having the hardest time in her life right now as she tries to avoid staring back at the meaningful expression written all over the face of Dick Grayson. She remembered how ecstatic she felt a few days back when, upon regaining consciousness, the tender and handsome visage of the man who calls himself Nightwing was the very first thing that took shape in her initially hazy eyesight.

But that moment of bliss is the very thing causing great dread in her heart. Now she is sure, more than ever, that she has been introduced to this odious concept of love; an emotion that she had always successfully dodged before. Who would have thought it to come at this point in her life, with a man whom she knows absolutely nothing about?

And as if to aggravate her already appalling predicament, Nightwing opted to get up from his perch and assist her in starting the camp fire. Taki again felt the most troublesome series of thuds in her chest while the crimefighter approached.

"Hey, you know you should be resting. Let me take care of this." The irresistible Dick Grayson said while gently taking the bunch of dry and brittle wood off Taki's arms.

The lady ninja wanted to curse at the crimefighter for putting her in such a compromising position. But at the same time, she's also fighting the incredible urge to just lunge at Nightwing and wrap her arms tightly around him. Every fiber in her body is shouting out at her to hold the man who has become the pure object of her immense affection.

But Taki is still possessed of the detrimental belief that giving in to this emotion would be ultimately disastrous for her. So in the end she just turned her back towards the equally distressed hero and clutched her shoulders tight, as if trying to contain the overpowering passion in her heart from becoming evident.

That moment of repressed emotions did not escape the watchful eyes of the Athenian warrior, who at that moment was sitting in conference together with Batman, Rock, Hwang Sung-Kyung, Azrael, Huntress and Robin. And Sophitia could do nothing but shake her head in disappointment.

"Taki, my friend. Don't fight it. It's high time for you to be happy." The Greek maiden quietly uttered in her mind as if sending a telepathic message to her Japanese confidant. Her trance was then interrupted by the Angel of Vengeance's inquisitive speech.

"Okay, Give me the skinny. What exactly are we dealing with here?"

"The what?" Hwang and Rock simultaneously snapped back in confusion, not being aware of the 20th century colloquial term Azrael just uttered.

"I mean, who and what is this Cervantes? And what's he capable of

doing?" rephrased the former enforcer of the Order of St. Dumas.

"Simply put, Azrael. Cervantes is or was a cruel pirate who was infused with supernatural powers by the infernal sword Soul Edge, turning himself into a hellish demon-man." Sophitia explained to the questioning Azrael.

"I've little experience in dealing with the supernatural, so I would appreciate it if you people could tell us a little more on how to defeat this creature." The Batman quipped, while focusing his attention on Rock whom he thought was not paying attention, but he later realized was gesturing their other companions to join them in the meeting. They waited for Taki, Nightwing and Seung Mina to assimilate themselves within the group before continuing the discussion.

"The first time we fought him," the Hellenic girl continued. "he was already very formidable. In spite of all out skills, he still managed to kill one of us." Sophitia added, referring to the Chinese nunchaku warrior Li Long.

"So how did you beat him?" Robin asked Sophitia.

"With this." Taki interjected, pulling her Mekki-maru short sword off its sheath and brandishing it around for everybody to behold. They were all taken by awe as the powerful blade radiated with bright and potent mystic energy; except for Bruce Wayne, who just squinted his eyes at the weapon's brilliance. "One blow to destroy Soul Edge, and another stab into Cervantes' heart. Satisfaction guaranteed."

"Then this should be easy." Robin remarked. "A piece of cake. A walk in the park. A"

"I wish I can share your optimism, Robin. But I'm afraid I'd have to disagree. It won't be that easy this time." Sophitia countered, drawing a quizzical look from the Boy Wonder.

"What made you say that?" Hwang asked the Athenian warrior.

"I'm not sure." Sophitia replied. "I wish the Omega sword could shed some more light in the matter. We've all taken part in the two quests, but this is the first time I've seen my weapon react to such evil."

"Maybe it has something to do with Ivy's involvement." Seung Mina suggested. "I may not know much. But if she is Cervantes' daughter, then she must have a portion of the Evil Seed inside her."

Hwang threw a slightly astonished glance towards his youthful lady-love. This is the first time he's seen Mina participate in a very grown-up gathering like this. But that didn't surprise him any more than did the young warrior's random but intelligent guess work. Maybe there is still hope for Mina after all, thought the noble warrior. Mina noticed Hwang gawking at her, to which she responded by playfully smiling back at him. The warrior-soldier almost bellowed a solid guffaw because of the girl's childish gesture.

"At any rate," Sophitia continued. "the most important thing is for us to escort Taki. She needs to get close enough to that pirate to

make sure she doesn't miss."

Batman then took this as a cue to take over the planning process. When he started talking, no one dared interrupt him, as they were all enraptured by the Dark Knight's charismatic aura and at the same time intimidated by his imposing presence. Once again, the Batman has assumed his rare yet essential role of field commander and team leader.

"We still have the soul hunters to worry about. I understand you think this Cervantes' is an arrogant oaf who relies too much on his weapon rather than an army of pawns. But it's always best to be prepared." Batman exclaimed.

"Then it looks like we'll need our best crowd fighter to spearhead the attack on his lackeys." Nightwing suggested.

"Take Seung Mina." Taki recommended, which mildly surprised everyone. "She's the best person we have for that job."

More surprises, Mina thought. Now Taki's even going to lengths of endorsing her capability. Times have changed, the Korean lass surmised.

"No, Taki, Nightwing." the Dark Knight shot down the proposal. "We're going to use the element of surprise. Taki, Ivy left you for dead, so she's not exactly expecting you to show up for another fight. And she's also unaware of the involvement of Rock and the others."

Batman then drew up a plan hinged on a diversionary strategy to confuse the enemies with a two-pronged attack. "Nightwing, Robin, and Sophitia; you will all go with me in staging a frontal assault against the soul hunters. The rest of you will protect Taki and move in, unnoticed if possible, to Cervantes' stronghold."

Just then, their conference was intermitted by an ominously hissing sound that pulled the ten heroes' attention towards another bright pillar of light coming from the north.

"There it goes again." Huntress uttered. "But this one is huge. What could be causing this?"

No one answered her anxious query. But deep inside her head, Taki's thoughts are racing. Contemplating on the grave implication of seeing the Evil Seed manifest itself twice, the determined Underground Hunter comes to an inevitable and forthcoming decision that she feels is the only way to end this nightmare once and for all.

"Ivy I cannot allow you to live any longer. Prepare to meet your creator."

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June 12, 1598

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The midnight air crackles with violent mystic energy radiating from the foreboding pillar of light heralding the infernal splendor of the Evil Seed. Standing right beside the foundation of the supernatural phenomenon, the principality-possessed warrior maiden Ivy beams with wicked joy while beholding the pure, fiendish power of her Ivy Blade as it functioned as the nexus in harnessing the energy of the Evil Seed. She can feel the power building up within the weapon, and she knows that any moment now, her snake sword will achieve the peak of magical energy which she needs to resurrect the sinister Captain Cervantes de Leon, whom the Englishwoman believes to be her real father.

Deep inside her spiritual psyche, the femme fatale can hear the resonating voice of the evil pirate.

"\_You have done well, my sweet daughter. Soon, I will regain the power of the Seed that escaped my being when that impudent meddler Taki dared to challenge my immortality.\_" The menacing voice echoed in her mind, to which the deranged combatant replied with gusto.

"Funny you should mention her, father." The smirking Ivy mumbled. "I would like to ask you for the honor of putting an end to her insolence, and her life as well."

"\_NO.\_" the vile spirit exclaimed. "\_Taki is mine. You may do whatever you wish with her body after I'm through rending her wretched soul to pieces. But you may not touch her for as long as life-giving air still flows through her nostrils.\_" Further commanded the soon-to-be resurrected Cervantes.

"With all due respect, my liege." Ivy retorted. "But the warrior whose essence you so eagerly crave may not prove worthy of your grace anymore. I have broken her spirit. I don't believe she can still pose a threat to your glorious reign."

It took some time before the voice in Ivy's head returned with unnerving force.

"\_Do NOT underestimate the iron will of the Underground Hunter. You haven't faced Taki's wrath the way I have. Her prowess is mine to conquer. Her life is mine alone to purge.\_"

"Why father," the Englishwoman interrupted. "You sound as if you actually dread that bitch's feeble abilities."

"\_Still your tongue, wench. Lest I draw it out of your brazen mouth and use it to inflict you with all new concepts of pain and torment.\_" The voice blurted out.

The Englishwoman opted to do as she was told, fearful of venting the ire of the demonic pillager to herself. However, she was compelled anew to summon her father's spirit after being reminded of the unfamiliar knights who bolstered the ranks of the Blade Hunters.

"Father, you are aware of the interlopers who now fight alongside our foes."

Again, a long interlude preceded the vile pirate's rejoinder.

"\_Yes, I am. These warriors are led by a man who calls himself the Batman. Though in my wisdom I sense an appalling greatness in this individual, my faculties are still unable to comprehend his origin or purpose.\_" Was the evil spirit's delayed replication.

"\_But make no mistake.\_" The cavernous voice supplemented. "\_They too shall be served in the sumptuous feast of souls I will indulge myself with.\_"

Ivy's trance was abruptly broken when she sensed something that made her stand up in attention. Closing her eyes tight, the lady warrior saw an image in her mind of a quartet of intruders currently making their way through the perimeters of the deserted Spanish seaport. Enhancing her mental perception, Ivy made out the intruders as the Batman, his partners Nightwing and Robin, and the mighty Athenian gladiator Sophitia.

"Father, they come." the alerted maiden recalled her sire's spiritual presence. "But there are only four of them. Taki is missing."

"\_The Underground Hunter is here as well.\_" Cervantes' voice replied. "\_The others are serving to draw our attention away from her clandestine intrusion.\_"

"\_But I will not be made a fool of this charade.\_" The plunderer furthered. "\_My daughter, have the soul hunters intercept the intruders, while you dispatch your minions to find Taki. They may only engage her in battle as a delaying measure. But they are not to kill her.\_"

"As you wish, father." The Englishwoman replied in full obedience.

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"I sense them." Sophitia suddenly exclaimed.

"As do I." The Batman remarked. "They're very near. Prepare yourselves." The Dark Knight further added in warning his team of the looming threat.

And as if in concurrence to the Caped Crusader's perception, the chilly fog partially obscuring the narrow trail of weathered soil suddenly lifted to reveal a multitude of fiendish soul hunters blocking the path leading to the Spanish port. The heroes were taken aback by the sheer number of the undead creatures, which greatly outnumber them by a factor of at least twenty to one. Clearly, Batman thought, Ivy has tasked the full force of the soul hunters to impede their progress. The four of them came to a realization that they're in for the fight of their lives.

Robin threw a glance at Batman, trying to anticipate his partner's next course of action.

"So, Batman, do we like hit em fast and hit em hard?" the Boy Wonder questioned the grim-faced Dark Knight.

"Hey, they don't look so tough." Nightwing sarcastically commented.

"Why don't we just mow right through them?" the guardian of Bludhaven furthered, still trying to put levity in crucial situations with his witty albeit inappropriate repartees.

"DO IT!" the Batman ordered, which completely startled the two Boy Wonders. And before they could do anything, their mentor was already charging towards the baneful battalion.

Robin and Nightwing tensed their muscles and dashed forward as well, with the courageous Sophitia right behind them. In an instant, the four were already in the thick of it as they engaged the horde with everything they've got. Fighting in pairs, Robin and Nightwing performed their patented teamwork in immediately laying waste a good number of the soul hunters. Using each other intermittently as either makeshift horse vaults or improvised sling shots, the energetic tandem made sure that not one zombie is able to gain close access to their position. Each one who so much as draws itself three yards in proximity either gets a powerful kick in the head or a staggering clout in the face by Robin's battle rod. Either ways, heads literally rolled as the ferocious duo smashed their way into the zombies' ranks.

Meanwhile Batman and Sophitia attacked the enemies mercilessly on their side of the battlefield. They worked with less teamwork, but the two combatants are so proficient in their trade that they immediately cut down a great number of the soul hunters. Every muscle fiber as taut as steel wire, the Caped Crusader utilized everything in his arsenal to push the enemies back. Each punch thundered like a magnum revolver and each kick exploded with virtual multi-megaton force as the Batman once again displayed the reason why he is known as the deadliest martial artist who ever lived; rivaled by perhaps only one other, and definitely bettered by no one.

Likewise, Sophitia Alexandra is not one to be left behind. Employing unequalled skills in the use of the broad sword and shield, the adroit warrior from Greece detonated like a neutron bomb, pummeling dozens of soul hunters at once with fierce and reverberating blows. Neither of them held back as they relentlessly pressed their assault, both knowing that all it would take is a mere fraction of a second to spell the difference between salvation and oblivion.

At that same moment, the other half of the heroic onslaught is currently under way. With the Korean soldier-warrior Hwang Sung-Kyung leading the siege, the vindictive Huntress; the man-mountain known as Rock; the juvenile warrior girl, Seung Mina; and the self-styled Angel of Vengeance, Azrael are all putting their lives on the line to cut a swath across enemy lines to provide a path for the lady ninja Taki who's trying to make her way through the evil pirate's stronghold. Ferocious and unrelenting, the Japanese warrior complemented the gallant efforts of the five who were protecting her, as they ran roughshod over the mindless soul hunters like so much butter being sliced by a red-hot knife.

Eventually, the Underground Hunter found herself on a wide platform that serves as the docking area of the gargantuan Spanish galleon. All of the sudden, she's alone and wondering what happened to the undead creatures previously blocking her path. Realizing that this is the calm before the raging storm, Taki clutched her two swords tight and prepared herself for an even more intense battle.

"My dear Taki," a mocking voice echoed through the air. "how exquisite of you to come here for a rematch. Won't you indulge me now, adversary?"

"Ivy, you coward." Taki angrily shot back. "Show yourself!"

"As you wish, adversary." Ivy's voice echoed, which heralded the entrance of the scantily-clothed English fighter bearing a large sword which appears too heavy even for a strong woman like herself to carry.

"But I resent that coward remark, and I'm going to show you how much."

Taki's eyes opened in disbelief after recognizing the familiar weapon held by her opponent.

"That's that's the Zweihander...! What in blazes are you doing with Siegfried's weapon?" the baffled ninja questioned her grinning enemy.

"Oh nothing. I just thought I'd relieve the poor boy of his heavy sword. He just couldn't handle it if it was conceived with him in his mother's wretched womb." The vile Englishwoman replied with a snide tone.

"Anyway, enough talk." Ivy quickly added. "Why don't we just proceed with the encore to our little scrimmage?" the vile woman challenged the lady ninja as she raises the huge blade in assuming a battle stance.

"You know," Taki countered. "I really would love to oblige, but I have a much pressing business to attend to. But don't worry, Ivy. I'm not leaving you here empty-handed."

And with that, what was once one became six, as Taki was quickly joined by her companions who had just managed to crush the soul hunter detachment they were battling earlier. Ivy raised an eyebrow at the sight of the familiar Rock, Hwang and Seung Mina, joined by the unknown figures of the Huntress and Azrael.

"I'm leaving you with some friends. They'll keep you company until well maybe until you breathe your last." The Underground Hunter remarked sarcastically, taking her turn at ridiculing the Englishwoman.

Mildly surprised by the unexpected participation of the three other Blade Hunters and their two future-bound compatriots, the Englishwoman nevertheless regained her composure.

"Taki my dear, you've really disappointed me this time. This is a private party. We don't need all these gate crashers to spoil our fun."

"Oh goody! Let's have some fun!" Seung Mina mockingly blurted out. "Let's see who can cut the largest piece off this raving lunatic."

Ivy's face suddenly turned red with anger. Even during the second quest, the teenaged blade fighter from the Korean peninsula has

always got the Englishwoman's number. Seung Mina perennially succeeds in doing the one thing that perhaps no other individual has ever done: make Ivy lose her temper.

And this instance is not an exception, as the crass and insulting remark uttered by the youthful combatant unleashed the vengeful indignation of the demented dame. Ivy subsequently turned a furious visage towards her opponents.

"You have insulted my being for the last time, Seung Mina. And you will pay for your insolence with your own life and of those who stand beside you, as well as everyone else you hold dear."

The formidable five didn't look even half scared at the Englishwoman's threat. However, Ivy's subsequent transformation totally mystified the quintet. Bellowing an unearthly, guttural cry, the enraged lady gladiator displayed yet another facet of her supernatural powers "as her body momentarily turned translucent before multiplying itself into five identical Ivy figures. The astonished heroes then realized the immense gravity of the threat they now face in the person of the evidently demon-possessed British warrior.

"I am Isabella Valentine, daughter and humble servant of the magnificent Captain Cervantes de Leon." Echoed the sepulchral voice of the demonized gladiator. "You have come to kill my father. Prepare to die."

At that very moment, the fearless Taki has just weathered the assault of a dozen more soul hunters, and is now preparing to board the eerie-looking galleon where the anomalous light display of the Evil Seed is emanating from. Utilizing the full strength of her strong and supple legs, the lady ninja pushed hard against the damp wooden scaffold, catapulting herself high up into the air where she executed an extremely graceful and athletic quintuple back flip that would put to shame the greatest gymnasts and acrobats who ever lived. She hardly made a sound as her spectacular aerial stunt culminated with a noiseless and stealthy landing, which barely disturbed the thick layer of dust covering the mahogany floor of the medieval vessel's upper platform.

"Impressive! Couldn't have done it better myself." A familiar voice emanated from the background. The startled Taki lifted her head up to sight of the evil Ivy standing in front of her with all the effrontery of an aspiring world conqueror.

"Ivy? How could you get here so fast?" the bewildered Japanese warrior cried out.

"What are you talking about? I've been staying on this very spot for the last ten hours." Snapped back the platinum-crowned femme fatale, feigning the impression of someone who had just been reminded of a forgotten instance. "Oh, you must have run into my exquisite Ivy stand-ins. Don't you just love what the power of the Evil Seed can do to you?"

"No, not while it can turn a lunatic sword fighter like yourself into a powerful, lunatic sword fighter like yourself." The lady ninja taunted the Englishwoman. However, Taki's smug behavior was instantaneously replaced by perturbation when she noticed the relic

held tight by her enemy's right hand.

"By the gods!" Taki muttered in consternation. "The Soul Edge!"

"You sound scared, adversary." Ivy snapped at Taki. "And you haven't seen half of the show yet."

At that point, the wicked British warrior raised the dreaded demon sword high up in the air, pointing its sharp end towards the heavens as its wielder began to exclaim a series of unintelligible chants. Ivy concluded her litany with a dreadful and booming cry that made Taki's hairs stand on ends.

"CAPTAIN CERVANTES DE LEON, RULER OF ALL CREATION, I CALL THEE FORTH! COME AND TAKE THY BOUNTY!"

"Heaven help us," the Underground Hunter mumbled in utter terror. "We're too late!"

As far as he can recall, this is perhaps the most grueling and physically exhausting campaign the enigmatic Batman has ever undertaken since the time he pushed himself to the limit of his endurance in trying to round up the Arkham escapees freed by Bane right before that incident when the Dark Knight's body and spirit was literally broken by the former Penaduro inmate. Together with his three allies, the Caped Crusader has already laid waste a great number of soul hunters who were trying to impede their efforts of laying siege on the diabolical pirate's sinister fortress. But the arduous task of battling nearly a hundred nigh-invincible and mindless zombies had taken its toll on the Batman's endurance, and that of his confederates as well. Finding themselves pinned against a cluster of boulders, the four fatigued warriors regroup for one final stand.

"I'm tired." Sophitia gasped. "I don't think we can pull this off, Batman."

"Yes, we can, Sophitia." The Dark Knight resolutely replied, his iron will simply refusing to allow his worn out body to quit.

Robin and Nightwing didn't say a word, though they too are also feeling the near depletion of their energies. This won't be the first time that the limits of their stamina were put to the test by their mentor while facing seemingly insurmountable odds. They remember only too clearly the countless times when the Batman didn't allow them to quit when the going got too tough; a stubborn exertion that in the end consistently proved to be the difference between life and death. And the two Boy Wonders do not consider this particular event an exception by any manner of consideration. Nightwing and Robin may be nearing the point of total exhaustion, but they have complete faith in the Batman's ability to lead them through this crisis.

But it seems providence has a different idea in making the heroes prevail over this adversity. From behind the ranks of the soul hunters, a ferocious battle roar pierced through the eerie groans of the atrocious creatures. The ever alert Sophitia heard the battle cry, which elicited a sigh of gratitude from the embattled Athenian.

"Hephaestus be blessed." Sophitia exclaimed in utter reprieve.

"Mitsurugi changed his mind!"

The mighty samurai emerged from the woods with forceful vengeance, and wasted no time in engaging the undead creatures in battle. Sophitia was about to rejoin the melee when she noticed the warrior fighting alongside the erstwhile indifference-plagued Japanese mercenary. The Hellenic maiden was stunned to see the fierce Li Long, alive and well, and utilizing his unmatched nunchaku prowess in pummeling the enemies to the ground.

Meanwhile, despite his overwhelming fatigue, Nightwing can't help but be amused by the redundant situation.

"Man, this is starting to become a habit. How many times do you think we'll get ourselves rescued while trapped by zombies against a big rock?"

Taking advantage of their second wind, the four weary combatants struck back against the vile denizen with renewed strength and determination, fueled partly by the unexpected yet encouraging involvement of the samurai fighter Mitsurugi and the nunchaku warrior Li Long. The struggle still didn't come any easier, but the reinforced ranks of the heroes began to gradually take the upper hand in this epic battle. Pretty soon, all six of them stood victorious amidst the littered and lifeless bodies of dozens of twitching soul hunters. Sophitia smiled at Mitsurugi when their gazes met each other's.

"Sophitia, I" Mitsurugi meekly began to speak to the Greek gladiator, a humble gesture quickly recognized by the astute woman.

"No, Mitsurugi." Sophitia gently replied. "No apologies. What matters now is your here and your friend" the Athenian's speech faded as her perplexed impression drifts to the apparently resurrected Chinese gladiator. Li Long merely grinned at the puzzled Sophitia when he saw her gawking at him.

All of the sudden, a tremendous explosion drew the attention of the six heroes towards the location of the platform where the evil pirate's galleon is docked. The sight that met them reeked with pure and unadulterated mystic malevolence: a huge, glowing ball of energy emerging from the waters of the Spanish port. Crackling with intense magical powers, the terrible sphere hovered over the galleon and peppered the night air with turbulent mystic lightning which burned or blew up everything it touched.

"Get down!" Batman hollered as a barrage of mystic lightning crackled towards their location. The others barely had time to react before being nearly hit by the lethal cannonade. One lightning bolt managed to strike a tree, which crashed violently to the ground merely inches away from where Robin lay.

It didn't take long before the lightning fusillade ceased. However, the atmosphere was disturbed anew by a deafening laughter that seemed to originate from inside the malevolent globe. This was followed by a booming utterance that completely horrified the wide-eyed Blade Hunters.

"OFFER ME YOUR SOULS!"\_ The deep, demonic voice resonated through the void.

"No!" the terrified Sophitia blurted out. "We're too late! CERVANTES HAS RISEN!"

"We're prepared for this contingency." The Batman firmly exclaimed. "And we've no time to lose. Let's move!"

The globe of mystic fire momentarily floated over the top of the upper platform before settling down right in front of the two women warriors. While it did, there is no measuring the pure joy written on the face of the baneful Ivy. On the other hand, Taki's face is almost devoid of emotions, as opposed to the sheer terror she feels in her heart while witnessing the sphere collapsing into itself to reveal the dreadful figure of the resurrected demon-man, the immortal pirate Captain Cervantes.

Eyes crackling with unearthly power, the evil Cervantes trained his menacing gaze first towards the woman who calls him father, and then slowly turns it in the direction of the embattled lady ninja. Meeting the eyes of the one soul who actually dealt him his only defeat, the pirate smiled contemptuously at his adversary.

Taki can feel the pure evil being exuded by Cervantes' glare. And all of the sudden, the brave warrior became gripped with doubt if she would actually survive this battle or not. She held on to both Mekki-maru and Rekki-maru as tight as she could, as if her life depended on them.

Cervantes lifted his immense arms toward Ivy, who released the hold she has on the evil sword. The Soul Edge then mystically lifted itself off from the ground and levitated towards its original master. Upon taking hold of the familiar weapon, the depraved demon-man cried out in revelry, invoking hundreds of lightning bolts which sliced the darkness of the night like some eerie display of Hadean celebration. It was as if all the demonic forces in the world convened to that single point to witness in jubilation the return of the most powerful and most wicked wielder of the despicable sword.

"\_Feel it!"\_ Cervantes screamed. "\_Feel my power!!!\_"

Turning his attention to the lady ninja, Cervantes vengefully pointed the Soul Edge towards her as he lashed on Taki with a fury that could have conjured a thousand hurricanes.

"\_And YOU have the temerity to challenge my immortality?!? YOU who knew of this power?!?"

"This is it." Taki thought to herself while heaving a deep breath to calm her otherwise turbulent nerves. And as if in defiance to the rampageous pseudo-deity, the lady ninja unsheathed her shimmering blades and brandished them in front of her hellish foe.

"I defy you, Cervantes." the lady ninja confidently declared. "I am Taki, the Underground Hunter. Scourge of the vile spirits. And to me, you're just another ghost in need of purging."

"\_Then you DIE, impudent one.\_" the furious Cervantes exclaimed while lifting the evil Soul Edge aloft.



"No one needs to die tonight, demon." A voice echoed from behind them. The two combatants were equally surprised to see the figure of Li Long standing alongside the rest of the heroes who had just arrived.

"Well, no one but you, I suppose." The smug Chinese quipped.

"\_H how could this be possible?\_" the confounded Cervantes muttered.  
"\_I killed you with my own hands\_"

"Surprised, old foe? You're not the only one who can come back from the dead, you know." The brave nunchaku fighter shot back as he pulls his deadly Twin Thunder out of its harness. "How about it, Cervantes. One resurrection man versus another resurrection man, winner takes all."

"Li Long, no!" Taki interrupted. "This is my fight. Don't get in my way."

The Chinese warrior simply smiled at the Japanese ninja. "Hey, Taki. Chie sends her regards, by the way. Do drop by for a visit someday if ever we all live through this."

Regaining his composure, the wretched pillager raised his sword anew above his head as he threatened to swing on the two warriors.

"\_I killed you before, Li Long. There's no reason why I can't do so again!\_" Cervantes cried out while lunging violently against the pair of Blade Hunters.

Taki instinctively made a quick somersault to avoid the bladed juggernaut hurtling towards them. But Li Long wasn't as fortunate. As he has not exactly regained his full fighting form, the Chinese combatant wasn't quick enough to dodge Cervantes' attack. He bellowed a tortured cry when the sharp blade sliced a gash across his shoulder.

"Oh no you don't!" Mitsurugi and Sophitia yelled in unison. Weapons gripped tight, the two Blade Hunters simultaneously attacked the pirate with nerve-staggering blows that sent Cervantes reeling back. And before he could pick himself up, the immortal plunderer was jolted anew by a series of thundering kicks in the head and body when Batman, Robin and Nightwing followed suit in the assault.

"\_AAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH\_" Cervantes screamed in enraged frustration.  
"\_YOU WILL ALL DIE FOR THIS!!!\_"

"Shut up!" Batman quipped before landing a staggering straight square on the pirate's face, sending him tumbling across the wide upper platform of the galleon.

"THOOM! Oh my that has got to hurt!" Robin yelled in delight even as the Blade Hunters surround the stunned Cervantes.

Suddenly, a bright flash of light burst out from the crouched demon-man. Everyone was caught unawares as the light explosion rendered them temporarily blind. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Cervantes got up and delivered a reverberating blow that

sent everyone crashing against the platform railings. Batman, Robin and Li Long hit their heads hard against the wooden pillars, knocking them out. Mitsurugi tried to grope for his katana but instead met the pirate's fist on his head which likewise rendered the mercenary unconscious. Sophitia, on the other hand, struggled to get up on her feet, but a powerful kick by the pirate sent her flying off the platform, landing hard on the ship's lower deck with a loud thud. Pain enveloped the Athenian warrior's body as it convulsed uncontrollably on the dusty scaffold.

Still fuming with unparalleled hate, the vengeful Cervantes turned his ire once more to the fallen lady ninja. Taki tried to resist as Cervantes grabbed her on the neck, but she was just too dazed to put up a decent struggle. The pirate held her aloft for a few moments, after which he hurled her against the ship's mast, splintering the wooden pole when Taki's head collided against its partially metallic trunk. It didn't exactly knock her out of consciousness, but the pitiful Japanese maiden started to throw up because of the immense pain throbbing in her cranium.

And as if enjoying the moment, the amoral Cervantes leisurely strolled towards the poor Taki. Taking hold of her lush, pitch black hair, the pirate dragged her limp body across the upper deck. And upon reaching the center of the structure, he effortlessly lifted her up once more. Taki appeared like a rag doll as Cervantes hoisted her aloft by her pony-tailed locks.

"\_These proceedings has grown to be quite tiresome. I know you see it the same way, too.\_" The pirate crassly remarked\_. "Be grateful, for I now relieve you of your frail and useless life.\_" Cervantes further added even as he positions the dreadful Soul Edge horizontally against Taki's neck, intent on slicing her head off her crimson silk-clad body.

Lifting his aching head off the filthy wooden surface, Nightwing caught sight of the evil pirate who was about to exact the telling blow to murder the lady ninja. In his frantic impulse to save the life of the woman he holds dear, the weakened crimefighter mustered all his remaining strength to push himself up from the floor. Feeling a sudden surge of adrenalin, Nightwing charged headlong towards Cervantes, bellowing a desperate roar as he rammed his body against the immortal foe, knocking both him and the unconscious Taki down.

Wobbling up on his feet once more, the enraged Nightwing faced the murderous demon-man even as he felt the blood trickling from his mouth.

"You will NOT HURT HER!"

"\_Boy, you have no idea who you're dealing with.\_" Cervantes shot back, his eyes sizzling with infernal heat.

And before the Bludhaven guardian could do anything, a beam of crimson light exploded from Cervantes' eyes, hitting Nightwing on the abdomen. The hellfire salvo penetrated the frail body of the embattled hero and eventually emerged from his lower back together with a glob of his own blood.

"RRRRGGGGHHHHHH" Nightwing cried out from the incredible pain before

collapsing down on the platform. The beam that Cervantes shot him with punched a searing hole right through Nightwing's abdominal area. And in that gruesome moment, all Dick Grayson could feel is immense torment coupled with cold-faced fear as he realized the seriousness of his condition. Nightwing knew right then that he could die any moment.

Ever vindictive, the vile pirate slowly walked towards the fallen crimefighter. Just when he was upon his helpless enemy, Cervantes heard another voice from behind him.

"Leave the boy alone." The deep and raspy voice of the Batman reverberated.

Turning to the enigmatic Dark Knight, the pirate marveled at the insolence he displayed.

"\_You hope to succeed where your comrades have already failed? You are so undone, Batman!\_" Cervantes lashed at the resolute Caped Crusader.

Flashing his patented, frightful poker face, the Batman stared at the evil plunderer with cold, piercing eyes.

"I would have just played a secondary role in helping these warriors vanquish the threat you pose." Batman uttered fearlessly. "But now it's become personal. Now, I'm going to take you down myself."

Cervantes was about to lunge on the defiant Dark Knight, but instead he felt a strong impact on his face as Batman came up with a surprising burst of speed, landing a crushing heel that the vile foe didn't even see coming. Stunned by his opponent's lightning attack, the demon-man quickly retaliated with a forceful swing, which Batman somersaulted away from.

Realizing that the enemy is too formidable with his sword, the Caped Crusader rolled away from him even as he grabs the mighty Omega sword lying on the floor. Sophitia's weapon in hand, the Batman faced Cervantes anew, muscles tensing and mind racing with unmatched alertness as he tries to anticipate the vile pirate's next move. Mystical metals clashed violently against each other as Batman deflects Cervantes' lunges at him. The loud metallic reverberations echoed through the malevolent night air while the two combatants battled fiercely. Eventually, the immense noise of combat roused the other unconscious heroes, who witnessed in awe the epic battle between the demonic pillager and the fearless Dark Knight.

Finding his katana sprawled beside him, Mitsurugi tried to join in the action. He was however prevented to engage by the Boy Wonder.

"But we must help Batman!" the samurai protested.

"No, Mitsurugi. You'll only get in his way." Robin assuaged the anxious mercenary. "Watch him work"

Cervantes ferociously followed each swing and each lunge with even more violent attacks, which the Batman skillfully fends off every time. Eventually, the Dark Knight recognized the frustration

beginning to set in over his adversary.

"You're getting desperate." Batman mocked the pirate. "Don't get clumsy on me."

The pirate almost blew his head off in utter rage and hate after hearing his opponent's scornful remark.

"\_AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!\_" Cervantes cried out.  
"\_DIE, YOU HATEFUL WORM!!!\_"

This is the moment the clever Caped Crusader was waiting for. As the crazed pirate recklessly swung the Soul Edge at him, Batman deftly eluded the lethal blow with a quick crouching pivot. His maneuver was followed by a swift leg swipe that knocked Cervantes' feet off the mahogany surface and sent him tumbling uncontrollably into the air. And even before the demon-man hit the floor, Batman was already up on his feet and spinning like a top, landing a devastating reverse roundhouse on the air-born plunderer. The force of the Dark Knight's kick sent Cervantes crashing head first on the platform with a loud cracking sound when the tremendous impact broke the pirate's neck.

Li Long gasped upon witnessing the spectacular move executed by the crimefighter. "He knows the Spinning Top maneuver!" the Chinese warrior marveled at the Batman's adeptness in the particular fighting move. "Who is this man?"

Even though his neck bones are already shattered, the demonic Cervantes still struggled stubbornly to continue the battle. However, the Batman is intent on ending it once and for all. Gripping the nigh-invincible Omega sword tight, he poured all his strength in one final swing that struck the Soul Edge with such devastating force that it was instantly shattered into a myriad of smaller pieces. The Blade Hunters' mouths were agape upon witnessing the destruction of the evil sword, which reverted to its original Ivy blade form after it lost the demonic essence of the Evil Seed that previously transformed it into the Soul Edge.

"He he did it" Mitsurugi muttered.

Batman then let the Omega sword fall off his hands, after which he turned his attention to the awestruck mercenary.

"It's over, Mitsurugi." Batman remarked. "You wish to see the pirate dead? Do it yourself. I don't want to take part in it anymore." He sullenly added.

"He's not really alive anymore to begin with." The limping and bloodied Sophitia interrupted. "By delivering the death blow, we won't be committing murder by killing a man who's already dead."

Their solemn musing was interrupted anew by the chilling and sinister voice of the debilitated demon-man.

"\_You dolts. You cannot kill me!\_"

The heroes turned at the grotesque form of the hideous monster to

which the evil pirate metamorphosed. Bellowing a monstrous groan, Cervantes twitched and convulsed while his outer skin shed itself off to reveal the smoldering flesh beneath it. The pirate's head was itself engulfed by flames, burning everything on it to leave the gruesome figure of a smirking skull covered by hellfire.

The stupefied heroes were even more startled when the unearthly screams of the Englishwoman Ivy tore through the turbulent milieu. The Blade Hunters turned to see the tormented warrior grimacing in pure agony, as if her life essence is being forcibly squeezed out from her. Sophitia then realized what's causing this new turn of events.

"He's absorbing Ivy's power!" blurted out the Athenian gladiator. "Cervantes is absorbing all traces of the Evil Seed to reenergize himself!"

At that same moment, the party composed of Rock, Huntress, Seung Mina, Hwang and Azrael were still engaged in fierce battle against the powerful Ivy dopplegangers. They were likewise startled when the magical clones suddenly doubled up in pain, and subsequently faded from existence.

"What happened here?" the perplexed Huntress echoed in search for an explanation to the baffling episode.

"I'm not sure" Hwang replied. "But I think we'll find the answer over there." The Korean defense commander followed up as he points toward the Spanish galleon Adrian, where a melange of supernatural fireworks is erupting from. The quintet wasted no time and immediately dashed toward the place which is to be the final battlefield to decide this momentous conflict between good and evil.

They were just getting ready to board the ancient vessel when they heard a fear-inspiring resonance that the Blade Hunters thought could only come from one individual.

"\_I don't need the damnable Soul Edge!\_" The transformed demon-man cried out. "\_I AM \*\*INFERNO\*\*! THE POWER IS NOW IN ME!!!\_"

Rampaging with immeasurable rage, Inferno began firing salvo after salvo of powerful magical blasts towards his hated opponents. Scattered by the relentless bombardment like cornered rats, the heroes frantically scampered to find cover for protection against the deadly hail of crimson hellfire, leaving the wretched demon-monster shooting his energy blasts randomly throughout the Adrian.

Amidst the raging fire spawned by Inferno's rampage, he caught sight of the unconscious figures of Nightwing and Taki lying beside each other, to which the baneful creature turned his ire on.

"NO!" Sophitia screamed when she saw Inferno aiming his smoldering arms on the helpless pair, ready to blast them into oblivion. In a desperate move to save her friends' lives, the furious Greek warrior frenziedly hurled her Elk shield. The mystic weapon zoomed towards the diabolical monster with deadly accuracy, connecting with a devastating impact that instantly cut off Inferno's left arm. The demon-monster howled out of the indescribable agony even as his severed appendage fell limp on the dusty platform and began to melt into nothingness.

The Batman then sustained the pressure of their attack by pouncing on the vile creature from behind. But Inferno was just too strong, as he easily shook the stubborn crimefighter off him and effortlessly flung his foe away. Only Batman's superb reflexes saved him from serious injury by instinctively correcting his awkward aerial position, enabling him to land on his two feet.

But before the Caped Crusader could stage another assault, Inferno angrily slammed his remaining arm against the hardwood platform. The immense force of the blow caused the upper platform to collapse, sending the two stalwart combatants down to the galleon's navigation room.

Rattled by the violent fall, Batman tried to shake off his dizziness, unaware of the enraged Inferno who was by that time already upon him. Before the Dark Knight could react, Inferno has already taken hold of him by the neck, and begun squeezing the life out of him. His eyes began to turn hazy, as the Batman groped for whatever gulp of air he can muster despite being lynched by the powerful demon-monster.

"\_Beg for mercy, Batman!\_" Inferno derided the gasping crimefighter. "\_I may reconsider. But then, I may not, since I don't have a heart to grant mercy! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA\_!!!"

The embattled Caped Crusader can barely hear Inferno's rambunctious laughter, as his hearing is already becoming impaired due to the immense pressure of the demon-monster's powerful grip, steadily tightening its squeeze around his neck. He was about to drift out of consciousness from asphyxiation when Batman suddenly heard Taki's voice in his head, echoing the words the lady ninja voiced out during that vital conference they had the day before.

"\_One blow to destroy Soul Edge, and another stab into Cervantes' heart.\_" Taki's voice resonated within the Dark Knight's clouded memory.

"The M Mekki-maru" Batman struggled. Summoning the last of his energies, he folded his legs in between himself and the sinister demonic creature. Pushing hard against his tormentor, Batman was able to free himself from the deadly clutches of Inferno. Barely taking time to catch his nearly depleted breath, the desperate Caped Crusader frantically looked around in search of Taki's short sword.

"Here!" Batman heard someone exclaim. Turning towards the direction of the voice, he saw the struggling Taki looking down from the ceiling of the navigation room, clutching the Mekki-maru sword and getting set to toss it to him.

"Stab him in the heart!" the lady ninja instructed while throwing the weapon over to the crimefighter.

In one swift move, the lightning-quick Dark Knight caught the blade in mid-air while simultaneously connecting with another kick on Inferno, sending the demon-monster sprawling towards the other end of the chamber. The Batman didn't give an inch to the enemy anymore, rushing at Inferno with everything he's got to end the demon-monster's threat once and for all.

And in one decisive moment, the world seemed to have stood still, as the mystical Mekki-maru penetrated Inferno's chest, eliciting a horrid scream from the evil creature. The Batman watched intently as his demonic adversary writhed in agony, then slowly ceased moving until there was nothing left but a still body reeking with the acrid smell of sulfur and brimstone. When Inferno's form finally stopped moving, the Batman suddenly felt tired, as the aches and pains in his battered anatomy began to manifest themselves.

Thinking the danger over, the exhausted Caped Crusader turned his back to his immobile foe. But then, he felt a sharp blow jolt the base of his aching neck. Stunned by the unexpected attack, the Batman nevertheless managed to turn his head to the sight of Inferno effortlessly lifting himself off the floor. Throwing a derisive glance at the mystical blade imbedded deep in his chest, the demon-monster pulled off the relic like it was nothing, and then slowly made his way toward the cornered Caped Crusader.

"Oh no!" Batman exclaimed in his mind. "The Mekki-maru didn't kill him!"

The embattled crimefighter tried to get up even as Inferno draws closer to him. And just when the demon-monster was about to pummel Batman with a fatal blow, the lady ninja jumped on top of the hellish creature and attempted to lock her arms around his burning neck.

"Aaaahhhhhhhh!!!" Taki cried out as Inferno's searing flesh burned her skin. But the contumacious Underground Hunter ignored the pain in her raging effort to pull Inferno's head off his body. However, the vile monstrosity was unfazed, grabbing the desperate ninja and pulling her away from him in one swift maneuver.

Slamming on the hold he previously had her on while he was still in the form of Cervantes, Inferno held Taki aloft by her hair again, intending to skewer her body with a sharp metal spike protruding from the upper scaffolding's support columns. Batman tried to rescue Taki from certain death, only to be met by a backhand blow that sent the crimefighter crashing against the wall. As he landed hard on the teak flooring, Batman started to throw up from the debilitating pain that was overwhelming his badly-bruised body.

Feigning a curious scrutiny of his intended victim, Inferno spoke to Taki for what he arrogantly believes as the last time.

"\_All you ever had before was pure luck when you managed to defeat me, Underground Hunter. But luck does not hold out forever, as you are about to find out.\_" Inferno brazenly echoed.

All hope seemed lost, as Batman helplessly watched the evil demon-monster approach the broken support columns while dragging the weakened Taki on the floor littered with sharp wooden splinters and jagged shards of shattered glass. He wanted desperately to rush to her rescue one more time, even if it could spell his own demise. But his body just wouldn't comply with his mind's commands anymore.

Just then, the Dark Knight's detective aptitude suddenly kicked in, as he remembered the remark uttered by Inferno a couple of minutes ago.

"\_But then, I may not, since I don't have a heart to grant mercy\_"

Then it dawned on the Dark Knight Detective: what if Inferno wasn't speaking metaphorically? What if he literally meant that he doesn't have a heart? Not in his body, anyway. Recalling a case he handled a long time ago, the enigmatic Dark Knight tried to find an anomalous element that might serve as the key to defeating the atrocious demon entity.

"A-HA!" Batman blurted out in his mind. Not far away from where he lay, the huge medieval compass which served as the main navigational tool for the sea-going vessel is sprawled face-first to the floor. Feeling a surge of renewed strength, Batman quickly grabbed the device. His bloodied lips formed a sinister grin upon looking at the spontaneously spinning red pointer arrow inside the navigational gadget. And the irregular rate of the rotation coincides with the calculated fluctuations of a proverbially excited heartbeat.

"You definitely picked the wrong man to mess with, Inferno." Batman burst out in calling the attention of the demonic creature who was about to murder the lady ninja.

Turning around, the revolting demon-monster was horrified upon seeing Batman with the compass clutched in his right arm and the Mekki-maru held by his left hand. The phosphorescent sword is aimed directly at the center of the direction-giving gadget.

"\_NO!!!\_" Inferno uttered in panic. "\_Not that! Let go of the compass!\_"

"Sorry." Batman mocked Inferno. "Unfortunately for you, someone else already tried to pull this trick against me. Of course, it didn't work."

And with that, the Dark Knight pushed the cabalistic weapon hard against the compass. As the cold steel blade of Mekki-maru penetrated the device, a frightening wail emanated from it, which was quickly followed by a stream of dark-red blood that oozed freely from the center of the compass and trickled down to the floor, where it sizzled and vaporized upon contact to the hardwood.

At the same moment, Inferno suddenly froze, unmoving as a statue and silent as a solitary shrub. The flames engulfing his head was instantaneously extinguished at the same time that his rotten flesh began to melt like cheap candle wax.

"\_Fuma kanryo\_" Taki exhaustedly mumbled as she witnessed the demon-monster being reduced to a puddle of harmless fluid, which subsequently hissed and volatized until finally, there was nothing left of the evil Inferno.

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A few moments later, all the exhausted yet relieved Blade Hunters gather together around the badly injured Nightwing, who was being cradled like a son by his mentor and friend. The Batman's voice was inaudible to everyone except his former partner who was gasping desperately to stay conscious.



"Dick you're lucky that no vital organs were hit." Batman assuaged Nightwing. "But we have to go back to our time. There's no way this era's technology can provide the necessary medical attention for you."

"Uh I guess this is a shut-out" Nightwing laboriously replied.

Their sullen congregation was interrupted when a flash of light appeared right beside the fallen crimefighter. The light formation, which was really a manifestation of a time warp, slowly died down to reveal the form of the Waverider, who had come to transport the Batman and his allies back to the 20th century.

The Blade Hunters drew their weapons at the sight of the Linear Man. They were nevertheless quickly pacified by Azrael.

"No." the Agent of the Bat interjected. "He's a friend."

Though trusting their newfound ally enough to hold their aggression back, Mitsurugi and his cohorts nevertheless gazed at the time guardian with anxious alacrity as he quietly approached the Dark Knight.

"It's time to go back, Batman." Waverider told the Caped Crusader, who didn't say a word apart from his nod of agreement to the Linear Man's statement.

Sensing what is about to transpire, Taki quickly ran to Nightwing's side. To hell with her life, Taki exclaimed in her mind. She will no longer keep her feelings imprisoned in a cage of doubt.

"You you're leaving?" Taki earnestly asked Nightwing.

"We have to, Taki." Batman intermitted. "Nightwing will die if we stay here."

With tears already starting to well from her eyes, Taki just nodded her head to the Batman. Looking at the saddened pair, the Caped Crusader opted to give the two some degree of privacy. The others followed suit, taking a couple of steps back to go just beyond earshot.

"Taki" Nightwing whispered as he lifted his hand to caress the soft face of the lady ninja. She subsequently took his hand and pressed it tenderly against her cheek. Her tears were already flowing down her face when she began to speak with a broken voice.

"T take me with you..?" The weeping Taki pleaded to Nightwing.

He didn't answer, opting to express his silent grief by holding her hand and planting a soft and tender kiss on it. Taki easily understood Nightwing's silence. And even though she feels her heart being torn asunder by the thought of not seeing him again, the Underground Hunter decided to offer her beloved the one thing that showed him the power of her love: sacrifice.

"I understand." The lady ninja muttered while forcing a smile on her lips.

Straightening the woolen cloth wrapped around Nightwing's wound, Taki affectionately kissed him on the forehead before staring at his gentle visage for the last time.

"Just don't forget me, okay?" she softly whispered to Nightwing, after which she turned her anguished face away.

Taki was still facing away when she saw her own shadow being cast momentarily by the flash of light that signified the departure of the future-bound crimefighters. The light disappeared just as quickly as it arose, leaving the melancholic ninja behind, with nothing but regret in her heart for not having shown her feelings for Nightwing. He'd still have left, she realizes. But at least she would have some semblance of memories to hold on to.

"Will Taki be alright? I feel so sorry for her." Seung Mina expressed concern over the sorrowful ninja while conferencing with the Greek maiden.

"Don't worry about her." Sophitia retorted. "She's a fighter just like all of us. She can pull through this. But let this be a lesson to you, Mina." The wise Hellenic warrior added, which elicited a pout from the wondering Korean lass.

"Me? Why me?" Seung Mina snapped back quizzically.

"Let's just say you'll never realize what you have until you lose it." The Athenian fighter remarked while throwing a glance at the gallant Hwang, who was then congregating with Rock, Li Long and Mitsurugi.

"Don't worry," the grinning Mina retorted. "His time will come."

"Well, I guess this is when we all go our separate ways again." Hwang Sung-Kyung remarked to his fellow Blade Hunters.

"Or maybe not, my friend." Li Long surmised. "Me and my good samurai buddy here still have a few jars of fine rice wine to down. Why don't you join us?"

"Whoa! I'll hold you to that, Long." The delighted Mitsurugi shot back at his Chinese cohort.

"Hmm well maybe I can take on you guys for a shot or two. But no alcohol for my young friend, okay?" Hwang cheerfully complied.

"Sorry that I have to pass, guys." The man-mountain, Rock declined. "There's still so much I need to do with Ivy. She's been through a lot of needless tribulations, and she's going to need all the help she can get. And there's also the matter of my sick ward which reminds me, I need to talk to Tak"

Rock was interrupted in mid-statement when the lady ninja walked up to him with Mekki-maru in her hands.

"Rock, I believe you need this to cure Bangoo." Taki exclaimed while giving her weapon to the American warrior. Rock threw a beholden gaze upon the Japanese warrior maiden while accepting the sword.

"Thank you, Taki. I'll never forget this." Rock expressed his gratitude for the lady ninja's generosity. "And oh, don't worry. I'll get this back to you in one piece."

"If you don't mind, Rock," Taki softly retorted. "As soon as you're done with Mekki-maru, I would like you to destroy her." was her request that slightly confused everyone.

"I I don't think I follow." The perplexed giant shot back.

But the Underground Hunter has already turned her back, opting to walk away from her fellow Blade Hunters who sympathetically fixed their eyes at her. Taki stopped a few yards away from her compatriots, and turned her attention toward the ball of light emerging from the eastern horizon, heralding in the start of another morning. The dawn of a new day brought Taki to an ultimate decision that, for some reason, felt immensely right for her.

"Time to find myself a new path in life"

## 5. Epilogue

Time, Love and Armageddon, Epilogue

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Time, Love and Armageddon

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\*\*EPILOGUE\*\*

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Feb 14, 1599

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A young and lovely peasant woman quietly attends to her chores as a weaver in a small and dainty Japanese fishing village. While nearby, a rich yet still youthful nobleman watches her intently. Enchanted by her beauty, the benevolent daimyo approached the girl and politely introduced himself to her, expressing how he was disarmed by her gentle charm.

Her first reaction was that of tremendous loathing, as the former ninja warrior Taki felt a natural impulse to draw her psi blade Jutte and drive this pestering suitor away from her house and from her life. However, the fierceness in her demeanor was immediately doused when she got a good look at the nobleman's handsome countenance and amiable smile. She can't begin to explain the wonderful feeling of warmth that enveloped her entire being. Staring intently at the comely stranger in front of her, Taki felt something familiar about this event, as if this very moment already took place not too long ago. Whatever it is, the strange sensation thrilled her to no end; and more importantly, effectively disintegrated the loathsome attitude she had against men.

Bowing her head in reverence, the former warrior of the underworld offered her hospitality to the nobleman.

"Please, my lord. My house is in shambles. And I'm afraid I have nothing to offer to your graceful presence." The uncharacteristically humble Taki remarked.

"I'm the one who owes you an apology, my lady." The kindhearted aristocrat replied. "I shouldn't have come barging in like this while you're in the middle of your chores. Perhaps I can pay you a visit later this evening?" The gentleman respectfully asked for permission to visit her.

"I will be most honored, your grace." Taki acknowledged the Japanese chevalier cheerfully.

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\*\*March 9, 1599\*\*

The sun showers the evening sky with brilliant crimson resplendence as it barely peeps over the western horizon at the onset of dusk. Most of the guests and well-wishers have already left. While near the gargantuan main gate of the regal ancestral palace of the Sato Clan, young nobleman Yaroze Sato beams while escorting the Shinto priest to his private entourage. Overlooking the vast courtyard, the radiant Taki gazes lovingly at the man whom she had just exchanged vows with a few hours ago. Her equally glowing Athenian confidant and guest-of-honor, Sophitia, stands right beside her.

Sophitia's heart is brimming with happiness for her beloved friend. And she can't possibly measure the joy the former dark warrior has to be experiencing at this very moment. As she stares intently at Taki, she can't find any trace of the woman who used to be feared by everyone for her battle-hardened disposition and dreadfully volatile temperament. All the astute Hellenic maiden can see right now is the blissfully serene face of a girl who can't possibly ask for anything more in her life. Sophitia was still deeply entranced in her jubilation that she didn't notice the tears of joy moistening her effulgent eyes.

"Hey what's with that face?" Taki thoughtfully asked her friend.

"Nothing" Sophitia retorted while wiping away the moisture from her eyes. "I'm just well I'm just so happy for you that's all."

Touched by her cherished friend's sincerity, Taki gently pulled Sophitia toward her and gave her a heart-felt embrace.

"Thank you, Sophie" Taki tearfully muttered.

The two best friends remained in that state for a few moments before hearing an echoing voice from down the courtyard.

"Sophie, Yaroze wishes to show me his collection of horses. We won't be gone for long." The resonating utterance of Sophie's husband, Rothion, reverberated from the main gate.

"Be careful!" Sophitia responded while waving her hand to her loving husband before turning her attention anew to her friend.

"Gotta hand it you, Taki. You snared a real good-looking one. Yaroze's quite cute." Girlishly exclaimed the grinning Sophitia. "He's almost as cute as Rothion."

"Nope. He's cuter." Taki jokingly snapped back, which elicited a resounding laughter from the two warrior maidens.

"But seriously," Taki resumed. "There's something kind of wonderful about Yaroze. Strangely wonderful."

"Of course there is, silly!" the Athenian exclaimed. "You wouldn't have fallen in love with him if you didn't see anything special about him, am I right?"

"No, no. That's not what I mean. What I'm trying to say is it's like I've known him all my life." Taki assessed. "To put it more accurately, it's like I have already met him before"

"Well, have you?" the Hellenic girl inquired.

"I'm not so sure anymore. All I know is there's something familiar about his handsome face his amiable smile his wonderful aura everything about him feels awfully familiar. I really have this immensely strange feeling that I've met him before. I don't know I just can't put my finger on it." The Japanese bride replied with a trace of perplexity in her voice.

"I guess that's how it is with your destined soul mate." Sophitia commented. "After all the confusion, questions you come up with, and prospects you allowed to pass through the course of your life, when that special person comes, you'll suddenly know the reason why you held yourself back."

"That's exactly how I felt with Rothion. He's not really the first to capture my heart. I admit I've had my share of intense emotional involvement with other men. And it puzzled me to no end why in Hades did I let them go why didn't I grab the opportunity that presented itself with the first man I fell in love with or the second or the third

"And when I met Rothion, all of the sudden, I have my answer. All of the sudden, I realized that the reason why I allowed those other chances to slip through my fingers is because I was waiting for him. All my life, I've been waiting for him."

"Wow!" Taki blurted out. "That's heavy! Could you write it down for me? I can give it to my husband and he can translate it into a Haiku or something." The former lady ninja teased.

"You know, Taki, in spite of your vaunted grim and gritty image, you really have a way of ruining a solemn moment." Sophitia retorted. "Which reminds me, sister. You owe me big time."

"How do you reckon?" a questioning Taki looked at her friend.

"Let me put it this way: would you like some condiments on that

sheath?" Sophitia shot back with a smirk.

"What? Oh" the new bride was stopped on her tracks when she remembered the wager the two of them started nearly a year ago. "Oh yeah, we made a bet on uh-oh I lost" Taki bit on her fingernail. "You didn't really think I was serious, did you?"

"Well I am serious." Sophitia teased. "And I intend to collect. Here, I even made a special sheath for Rekki-Maru just for this occasion." The Athenian added while producing a package wrapped in expensive linen.

Taki burst into a resounding laugh when she beheld the contents of the package, which turned out to be a sweet-smelling, raisin-adorned gingerbread loaf made to look like a sword holster. The two chuckling maidens then pinched and poked at each other while making their way to the kitchen.

Later that night, Yaroze Sato was sitting in front of his working desk, scribbling furiously at the lengthy scroll littering the rich walnut material making the surface of the table. He was so immersed in his chore that he completely didn't notice the beautiful, kimono-clad woman approaching from behind. Yaroze drove the tip of his quill pen into the hardwood when he was finger-jabbed at the waist by his giggling wife.

"Taki you almost gave me a heart attack." The panting Yaroze blurted out. "Why do you always sneak up on me like that?"

"Old habits die hard. I used to be a ninja, you know." The snickering Taki replied as she tenderly massaged the breadth of her husband's chest. "Sorry I startled you."

Noticing the messy scroll of paper over the work desk, the curious woman peered through its engrossing contents.

"I didn't know you're writing an epic." Taki remarked. "When did you start on this?"

"I already told you, haven't I?" Yaroze answered. "Right after our engagement, when you began to tell me about your adventures as a demon hunter."

"Oh" the enlightened Taki quipped while continuing to browse through the parchment.

Her attention was drawn to the upper edge of the scroll, where the title "The Soul of a Warrior" is etched in bold characters. A reminiscing smile formed in the woman's face when she recalled the perilous life she used to lead as the feared Underground Hunter. Though filled with danger, she nevertheless acknowledged that segment of her life as a requisite to leading her into the peaceful existence she's now about to commence. And if she is to be given a choice, Taki would most certainly not change anything about her past, for all of it led to this blissful present which promises the roseate prospect of a bright and blessed future for herself and her husband. And right now, she can't possibly be more eager than she already is to hasten the coming of tomorrow.

"My love, I'll be waiting in bed. Come to me whenever you feel like

it." Taki enticed her husband with a most alluring timbre.

"Alright." Yaroze curtly replied before carrying on with his tedious scribbling.

However, as if waking up from a deep slumber, the nobleman suddenly realized what he stands to miss in the first night of his marriage with his beautiful bride.

"I must be insane! What am I doing?!?" Yaroze blurted out as he frantically dashed into the bed chamber.

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Dec 14, 1957

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Japanese-American technician Robert Hiroyuki, working from an observatory in Matterhorn peak in Switzerland, received a cable message from a group of scientists at the other side of the world. Hiroyuki, himself a part of the worldwide scientific exploration project known as the International Geophysical Year (IGY), read the missive, containing an instruction to point the large radio telescope at the coordinates given.

However, he got distracted by a book he was reading, and made a mistake by entering a set of coordinates which are three degrees off target. Unaware of his error, the bespectacled technician quickly returned to the book which he had immersed his undivided attention in for the last three hours; a collection of epic Haikus written by one of the greatest names in medieval Japanese literature: Yaroze Sato. The title of the compilation: "The Soul of a Warrior."

Later, scientists reviewing the sky photo noticed an anomaly in the star pattern. The aberration was determined to be an enormous meteor cluster, which subsequent calculations revealed to be on a direct collision course with the Earth. But the impact is not expected to happen until after thirty years, giving them enough time to prepare. They immediately relayed their findings to the United States Office of the Secretary of Defense, who initiated a top secret military and scientific committee whose task is to conduct studies and prepare strategies on how to vanquish this cosmic threat.

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\*\*Dec 7, 1987\*\*

A joint Russian-American top-secret space mission commences, launching two gigantic rockets carrying more than a hundred multi-megaton neutron bombs into space from an orbiting space station. It took all of two months for the nuclear missiles to reach the Mars-Jupiter asteroid belt, where it intercepted the deadly cluster. As it detonated, the missiles set off a calculated system of explosions designed to use the asteroid belt itself to scatter the

rampaging meteor cluster.

The top-brass officials of the two superpowers who participated in this world-saving mission held their breaths as the countdown to ground zero began. Thirty minutes later, radio telescopes attached to a pair of roving satellites in Martian orbit confirmed the explosion of one hundred twenty neutron bombs. And ten seconds since, the same satellites beamed an array of electronic data that, upon reception by the Earth Defense station, immediately began processing them.

The Soviet-American committee exploded with cheers, laughter and sighs of mixed relief and anxiety when the monitor screens confirmed that the destructive meteor cluster was completely scattered by the precise nuclear detonations. The mission was successful, and the Earth was saved from total annihilation.

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Feb 14, 1999

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Dick Grayson felt a strange compulsion as he walks past the Bludhaven Museum of World History. He ignored the weird feeling, scurrying past the city landmark in an effort to make it on time for his lunch date with a certain Nina Williams, a lady who has given him much to wonder about during the past few days. Later, on his way back to his apartment after being stood up by his mysterious date, the police academy student who is secretly Bludhaven's resident crimefighter operating under the guise of Nightwing, again felt the unusual drive to enter the museum. He then walks through the door.

The compulsion drew him to the Nippon exhibit, where his attention was caught by a display case containing a lock of hair and a note written in Japanese. The exhibit label described the relic as belonging to a woman named Taki, a legendary warrior who gave up her adventures to be one with the love of her life, the Japanese nobleman and epic chronicler Yaroze Sato.

Being fluent with the language, Dick Grayson began reading the note which contained the following lyric paraphrase:

"Like this lock of hair, my love for you will endure the test of time. You are my life, my song, and my salvation. You're the wind beneath my wings, and the light that shines in my nights."

Dick discreetly laughed at the trivial coincidence of the note having the words "night" and "wing" in it. But suddenly, he felt an eerie yet soothingly warm feeling envelope his being, as if some ethereal spirit is wrapping its arms lovingly around his body. This was followed by a strong sensation of deja vu that puzzled the crimefighter immensely.

He nevertheless dismissed the experience as a freakish side effect of too many late nights patrolling his city. "Hmph, next thing I know, I'll be sailing the seven seas hunting for pirates."

Dick then interrupted himself in mid-thought, wondering how he ever



came to thinking about pirates.

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\*\*Vanishing Point\*\*

"Waverider, they don't remember a thing." Liri Lee commented to her teammate while monitoring the sophisticated device called the chronoscope. "How'd you do it?"

"Remember how I possess the power to telepathically feed historical information to a person just by touching him?" Waverider began. "Well, I just found out recently that I can also do the exact reverse. And in this case, I just erased the portions of their memories about their encounters with each other. Neither Batman and his team nor Taki and the 16th century warriors will ever recall running into each other."

"Yeah, but what about the battle with the resurrected Cervantes?" the female Linear Man further inquired.

"Simple. The Blade Hunters just remember going through that adventure by themselves. The important thing is, as far as everybody is concerned, no Batman ever defeated a Captain Cervantes, nor a Taki ever fell in love with a Nightwing." The stalwart time guardian further explained.

A permeating silence abruptly settled over the two Linear Men while Waverider tried to contemplate the chain of events that eventually led to the Earth's salvation. Catching on to an idea he only now realized, Waverider then turned suspiciously to the mysterious Liri Lee.

"Admit it, Liri. You knew this would happen." Waverider accused his comrade.

"Whatever made you say that, Waverider?" Liri snapped back while feigning a look of ignorance on her face.

"Well, for one thing," the mightiest Linear Man began to explicate. "you didn't try to stop me when I rushed to the 16th century to rescue Batman and the others."

Realizing it utterly futile to further deny her handiwork, the amused Liri Lee finally admitted her role in the time-spanning drama. "Okay, you got me there. But I'm not guilty of anything except for a little tweaking."

"Tweaking?" Waverider repeated.

"Yeah. Look Rider, Nightwing may be one of the best in the trade, but there's no way he could have caught Taki's shuriken on time. So I kind of slowed time down a bit around the throw blade's path."

"And that led to Taki noticing Nightwing." Waverider completed the recap.

"Brilliant, isn't it?" the female Linear Man beamed.

"What? The way I see it, all it took to attract Taki's attention was

just a fancy game of catch. Is it really THAT easy to impress girls?"

"For most of us, yeah, it's that easy." The pouting lady time guardian replied. "You know what's the problem with you overbearing macho jerks? You always seek to do things the hard way. You always strive to utter the most flowery words in the dictionary and do the most death-defying and, dare I say it, stupid stunts you can think of to impress a girl, when all it has to take is one red rose and a few simple words spoken from the bottom of your heart. That's it."

"Geez, really?" a dumb-looking Waverider boyishly replied. "Man, maybe that was how she saw me a perfect jerk."

"Who's she?" Liri Lee reacted to Waverider's musing.

"Oh, forget it. It doesn't matter."

"WHO'S SHE?!?"

"Okay, okay geez" Waverider was forced to reply. "She's just a girl I met in the university. I courted her for six years and she just you know dissed me."

Liri Lee felt like bursting into a frenzied laughter. But she tried to restrain herself, not wanting to embarrass her already sheepish compatriot. She instead hurled another question towards Waverider just to prevent herself from chortling.

"What's her name?"

". " Waverider intentionally mumbled softly to prevent Liri from making out the name.

"What? I can't hear you."

"GERALDINE! Okay, are you happy now???" the embarrassed time guardian blurted out.

A few moments of silence again permeated through the peaceful ambiance of the Vanishing Point monitor room, which was broken anew when Waverider returned the conversation to its original subject.

"All points considered, Liri, I think you did a smashing job of cheating, that is."

"No. That's not cheating." Liri Lee countered. "That's setting things right."

"Whatever" the golden-hued time protector quipped. "At any rate, I commend you."

"And may I ask why?" Liri questioned her teammate's dubious statement.

"That stunt with the shuriken is something I'd have done if I thought of it." The grinning Waverider shot back. "You're starting to think a lot more like me."

"Rider" Liri muttered.

"Yes, Liri?" he replied.

"Don't push your luck."

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\*\*Dec 23, 1999\*\*

Following up on a lead Batman told him to investigate, Robin waits patiently atop a towering office building in the bright and bustling Asian city of Hong Kong. Tapping into his comm-link, he contacts his partner and waits for further instructions.

"Robin, so far this is the best we can do. The Joker is up to something huge, so this means he needs funding." Echoed the Dark Knight's voice in the sophisticated communication device attached to Robin's face mask.

"Uh-huh. And you still think he's not colluding with Luthor this time?" inquired the Boy Wonder.

"I believe it's safe to rule that possibility out. After that incident in Metropolis, I strongly doubt those two would ever meet again without trying to murder each other. Besides, the new evidence we got strongly suggests a new player in this game."

"Yeah, Eastern Sun Trading. I used to believe they're pretty legit, and I just can't figure out what's in this racket for them."

"Eastern Sun is a direct affiliate of this financial giant called Mishima Conglomerate, the largest corporation in Japan and one of the biggest in the world, falling somewhere in between Lexcorp and Microsoft." Batman further clued in his young partner. "I've always suspected something fishy about Mishima, but I just didn't have the time to look further into its activities. Until now, that is."

"You have a point, Batman." Robin concurred. "Now that I thought about it, this whole racket is starting to look like a millennium-scale caper from a certain point of view. Especially after what happened to Kuala Lumpur last week."

"Forget Kuala Lumpur." Batman echoed back. "I have reason to believe that this is another scheme geared at taking advantage of Gotham's vulnerability. I'd look into it myself, but right now my hands are tied with the matter of that butchered body I found near Wayne Manor."

The resolute Boy Wonder scanned the area again with his one million dollar night-vision binoculars to familiarize himself more with the lay-out of the city. Confident that he can easily swing around unnoticed, Robin radioed Batman one more time before pulling a stretch of decel cord from his utility belt.

"So who am I looking for, Batman?"

"Oracle gave us a lead on a person we can trust in that locale. He's a veteran secret agent working for the Hong Kong International Police Force, and I believe he's expecting you." Batman further instructed his partner.

"What's his name?"

The exhausted Dark Knight paused for a while, then his voice came crackling back with a short reply.

"Lei Wulong. Go find him and contact me when you do."

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\_\*\*THE END (?)\*\*\_

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file.